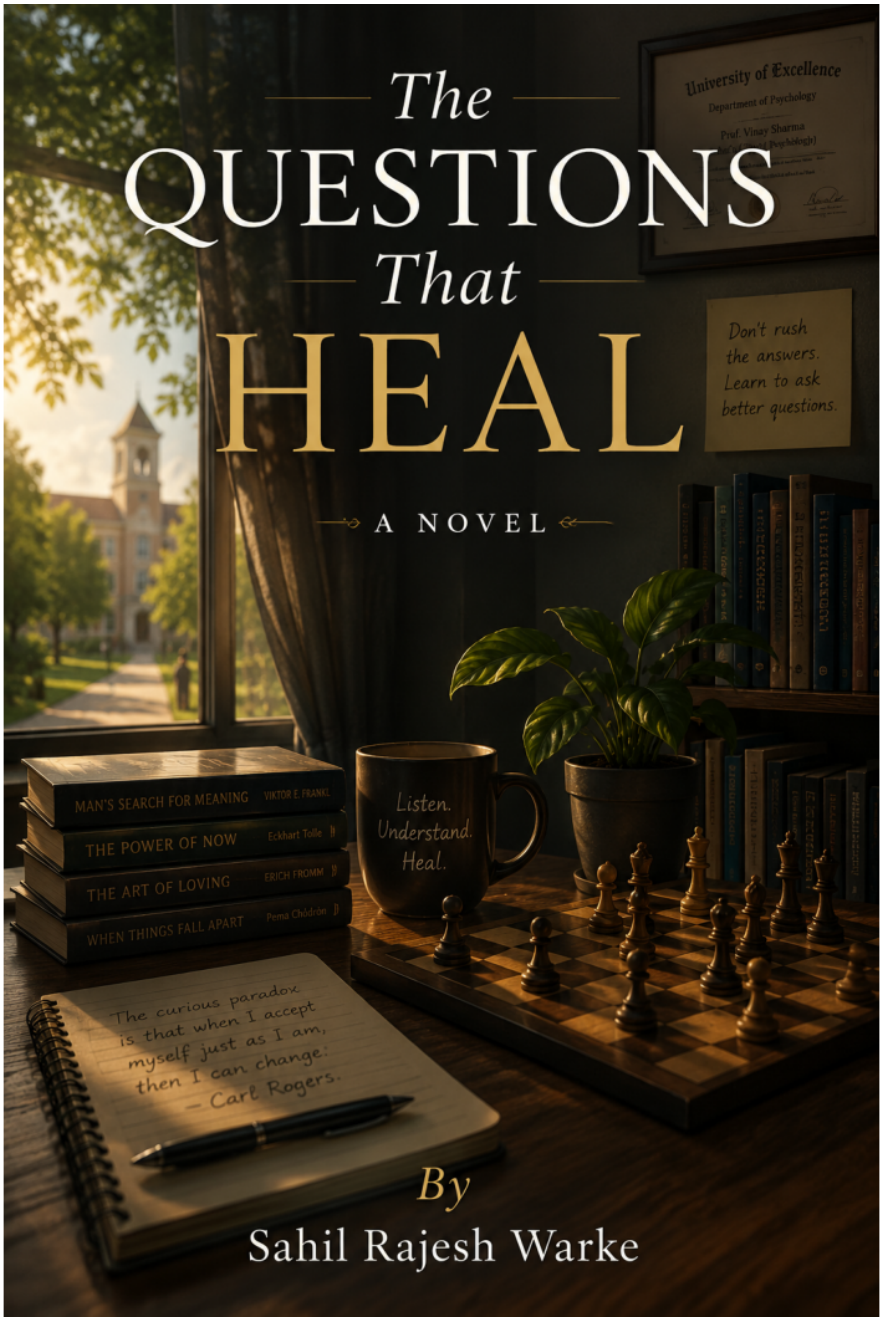
The
QUESTIONS
That
HEAL
A NOVEL
University of Excellence
Department of Psychology
Prof. Vinay Sharma
Don't rush the answers. Learn to ask better questions.
MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING VIKTOR E. FRANKL
THE POWER OF NOW Eckhart Tolle
THE ART OF LOVING ERICH FROMM
WHEN THINGS FALL APART Pema Chödrön
Listen. Understand. Heal.
The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.
– Carl Rogers.
By
Sahil Rajesh Warke

# The Questions That Heal

Sahil Rajesh Warke

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The Questions That Heal
The Question After the Rain
The Weight of Belief
When Words Become Weapons
The Walls We Build
Beyond Labels
The Mirror and the Mind
The Smile Hidden Behind Silence
Epilogue - The Quiet Beginning

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# The Questions That Heal

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# The Question After the Rain

(The rain had just stopped. Cool air drifted through the college corridors as students hurried across the campus, careful not to step into the puddles that reflected the gray evening sky. Most classrooms had already emptied, leaving behind only the faint sounds of distant conversations and footsteps.

Professor Vinay closed the psychology textbook in his hands and slipped it into his leather bag. Just as he turned toward the corridor, he noticed someone standing a few feet away.

It was Rudhika.

She clutched her notebook tightly against her chest. Her eyes followed the professor for a moment before she gathered enough courage to speak.)

**Rudhika**: Professor… may I ask you something?

(Vinay looked up and smiled. He had begun to expect this. Whenever a lecture ended, Rudhika often seemed to leave with more questions than answers.)

**Professor Vinay**: (Closing the zipper of his bag.) You usually do.

(Rudhika let out a small, nervous smile. She lowered her eyes for a brief moment, wondering if her question would sound strange.)

**Rudhika**: Why do people fear questions?

(Vinay looked at her for a moment. Instead of answering immediately, he glanced around the nearly empty corridor.)

**Professor Vinay**: Before I answer… tell me something.

**Rudhika**: (Blinking in surprise.) Me?

**Professor Vinay**: Yes. You asked the question. So what do *you* think?

(Rudhika looked down at the wet floor. Tiny ripples danced in a puddle

where raindrops still fell from the roof. She remained silent for a few seconds.)

**Rudhika**: (Thinking carefully.) Maybe… because questions expose what we don't know.

**Professor Vinay**: Hmm.

**Rudhika**: (Gaining a little confidence.) If someone asks me something I can't answer… I feel embarrassed. Maybe everyone feels that way.

**Professor Vinay**: That's one possibility.

(He began walking slowly down the corridor. Rudhika followed a step behind, matching his pace.)

**Professor Vinay**: Let me ask you another question.

**Rudhika**: (Smiling faintly.) You always answer my questions with more questions.

**Professor Vinay**: (Chuckling.) Occupational hazard.

(Rudhika laughed softly.)

**Professor Vinay**: When you were a child, did you ask many questions?

**Rudhika**: Too many, according to my parents.

**Professor Vinay**: Were you afraid then?

**Rudhika**: No… not at all.

**Professor Vinay**: So something changed.

(Rudhika's smile faded as she thought about it.)

**Professor Vinay**: A four-year-old can ask, "Why is the sky blue?" without worrying about sounding foolish. An adult often knows the question… but keeps it locked inside.

**Rudhika**: Why?

**Professor Vinay**: Because somewhere along the way, many of us begin believing that asking a question is the same as admitting ignorance.

(They walked in silence for a few moments. The sound of their footsteps

echoed through the corridor.)

**Professor Vinay**: But think carefully, Rudhika. Which person remains ignorant the one who asks, or the one who stays silent because they're afraid?

(Rudhika stopped walking.)

She didn't answer immediately.

Instead, she watched a group of students pass by. They laughed loudly, discussing an upcoming assignment. One of them confidently explained a topic that, from what she had heard in class, was completely wrong.

She wondered how many people spoke confidently simply because they were afraid to ask.

**Rudhika**: (Quietly.) The one who stays silent…

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Knowledge rarely begins with an answer.

It almost always begins with the courage to ask a question.

(A gentle breeze drifted through the corridor, carrying the scent of rain-soaked earth. Most of the students had already left. The campus, which had been bustling only a few minutes ago, was slowly settling into silence.)

(Rudhika remained thoughtful. Vinay noticed she wasn't completely convinced.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me honestly.

**Rudhika**: (Looking up.) Hmm?

**Professor Vinay**: Have you ever stopped yourself from asking a question?

(Rudhika let out a quiet laugh.)

**Rudhika**: More times than I can count.

**Professor Vinay**: Why?

**Rudhika**: (She hesitated.) Sometimes… I feel everyone else already understands. If I'm the only one asking, maybe they'll think I'm slow.

**Professor Vinay**: Has anyone ever actually told you that?

**Rudhika**: No…

**Professor Vinay**: Then who told you?

(Rudhika opened her mouth to answer but stopped.)

(The question lingered in the air.)

**Rudhika**: (Softly.) I… don't know.

**Professor Vinay**: Interesting, isn't it?

(He rested one hand on the corridor railing.)

**Professor Vinay**: Sometimes the loudest critic in our lives isn't another person.

It's the voice we've built inside our own minds.

(Rudhika looked at him quietly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Psychology has a name for this.

**Rudhika**: (Her curiosity immediately returned.) It does?

**Professor Vinay**: We often create an imaginary audience.

We feel as though everyone is constantly watching us… judging every word we speak, every mistake we make.

But here's something fascinating.

Most people are too busy worrying about themselves to spend much time thinking about you.

(Rudhika blinked.)

**Rudhika**: So… everyone is busy wondering what everyone else thinks of them?

**Professor Vinay**: (Smiling.) Exactly.

Imagine twenty students sitting in a classroom.

Nineteen of them are thinking,

“I hope nobody notices I’m confused.”

And the twentieth stays silent because she believes the other nineteen understand perfectly.

(Rudhika couldn’t help smiling.)

**Rudhika**: That… actually sounds like my classroom.

**Professor Vinay**: More classrooms than you might imagine.

(They resumed walking toward the college garden. Rainwater still clung to the leaves, sparkling in the fading evening light.)

**Professor Vinay**: Let me ask you one last question before we go home.

**Rudhika**: (Grinning slightly.) Another one?

**Professor Vinay**: Naturally.

If a question exists only inside your mind…

and you never ask it…

who loses more?

The teacher…

or you?

(Rudhika didn’t answer immediately.)

She imagined every question she had swallowed over the years.

Questions she thought were childish.

Questions she feared would make others laugh.

Questions that had quietly disappeared before they were ever spoken.

She looked at Professor Vinay.

**Rudhika**: I do.

**Professor Vinay**: (Nodding gently.) Exactly.

A teacher may lose one opportunity to explain.

But a student can lose years of understanding.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

The silence no longer felt awkward.

It felt… thoughtful.

(The evening sun briefly peeked through the clouds, casting a soft golden light across the rain-washed campus. The puddles that had mirrored gray skies now reflected streaks of orange.)

(Rudhika and Professor Vinay continued walking toward the college garden. The silence between them was comfortable.)

**Rudhika**: Professor…

**Professor Vinay**: Hmm?

**Rudhika**: Were you always like this?

**Professor Vinay**: Like what?

**Rudhika**: Confident. Calm. The kind of person who never seems afraid to speak.

(Vinay smiled quietly, then looked ahead instead of at her.)

**Professor Vinay**: Not even close.

(Rudhika looked surprised.)

**Rudhika**: Really?

**Professor Vinay**: When I was in my first year of college, I was sitting exactly where you usually sit.

The third bench.

Near the window.

(Rudhika listened intently.)

**Professor Vinay**: One day, my professor was teaching memory.

He said something that didn’t make sense to me.

I thought about raising my hand…

I even lifted it halfway.

(He paused.)

**Professor Vinay**: Then I looked around.

Everyone else was writing notes.

No one seemed confused.

So I told myself, “The problem must be me.”

I lowered my hand.

**Rudhika**: (Quietly.) What happened then?

**Professor Vinay**: Nothing.

That’s the problem.

Nothing happened.

The class ended.

Life moved on.

But my question stayed with me.

For weeks.

(Rudhika frowned.)

**Rudhika**: You never asked it?

**Professor Vinay**: No.

I convinced myself it wasn’t important.

Months later, while reading a psychology book, I found the answer by accident.

Do you know what shocked me?

(Rudhika shook her head.)

**Professor Vinay**: My confusion had been completely reasonable.

The professor had skipped an important explanation.

Several students had misunderstood the topic.

Nobody asked.

Everybody assumed everyone else understood.

(Rudhika lowered her eyes.)

**Rudhika**: So… everyone was pretending.

**Professor Vinay**: Not pretending.

Protecting their image.

There's a difference.

People often protect how intelligent they appear…

even if it costs them becoming more intelligent.

(The words settled heavily in Rudhika's mind.)

**Rudhika**: (After a long pause.) Professor…

**Professor Vinay**: Yes?

**Rudhika**: Have you ever been asked a question you couldn't answer?

(Vinay laughed.)

Not a small laugh.

A genuine, wholehearted laugh.

A few nearby pigeons fluttered into the air.

**Professor Vinay**: Almost every year.

(Rudhika stared at him.)

**Rudhika**: Seriously?

**Professor Vinay**: Of course.

Do you know what I tell my students?

**Rudhika**: What?

**Professor Vinay**: “I don’t know.”

(Rudhika blinked in disbelief.)

**Professor Vinay**: Then I add…

“Let’s find out together.”

Knowledge isn’t damaged by admitting ignorance.

It’s strengthened by the willingness to explore it.

(Rudhika smiled.

For the first time since the conversation began, she felt that asking questions wasn’t a test she had to pass.

It was an invitation to think.)

Just then, the college bell rang in the distance.

The campus was officially closing for the day.

(The bell echoed through the campus one last time. A security guard in the distance began locking the classrooms.)

**Professor Vinay**: I suppose that’s our signal to leave.

(Rudhika nodded and adjusted the strap of her bag. They walked toward the college gate at an unhurried pace.)

After a few moments, Vinay spoke again.

**Professor Vinay**: Rudhika.

**Rudhika**: Yes, Professor?

**Professor Vinay**: Can I tell you something I’ve noticed about you?

(Rudhika looked slightly nervous.)

**Rudhika**: Is… is something wrong?

**Professor Vinay**: Quite the opposite.

(He smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: In every class, there are students who ask questions because they want to impress others.

There are students who ask questions because they're preparing for an examination.

And then…

there are a very few students who ask questions because they genuinely want to understand.

(He looked at her.)

**Professor Vinay**: You're one of them.

(Rudhika froze for a moment.)

She wasn't expecting that.

A faint warmth spread across her cheeks.

She quickly looked away, pretending to straighten the notebook she was already holding perfectly.

**Rudhika**: (Embarrassed.) I… I just ask whatever comes to my mind.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Never lose that.

Facts can be memorized.

Curiosity cannot.

(It was one of the simplest compliments Rudhika had ever received.

Yet somehow…

it felt like one of the most meaningful.)

(They reached the college gate. Outside, the roads still glistened from the rain.)

**Rudhika**: Professor…

**Professor Vinay**: Hmm?

**Rudhika**: Can I ask… one last question?

(Vinay laughed softly.)

**Professor Vinay**: I was wondering how long it would take.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: If asking questions is so important…

then why do some people become angry when their own beliefs are questioned?

(Vinay's smile remained, but this time there was a thoughtful look in his eyes.)

He glanced at the darkening sky and then at his watch.

**Professor Vinay**: That's not a five-minute conversation.

(Rudhika looked slightly disappointed.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tomorrow.

Same time.

After class.

We'll talk about why people defend beliefs as if they're defending themselves.

(Rudhika nodded eagerly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Until then…

I want you to observe something.

Don't argue with anyone.

Don't try to change anyone's mind.

Just notice how people react when someone politely questions an opinion.

You might discover more than any textbook could teach you.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: Homework?

**Professor Vinay**: (Grinning.) Psychology homework.

(The professor walked toward the faculty parking area.

Rudhika stood at the gate for a few moments, watching him disappear into the evening.

Then she looked up at the clearing sky.

Tomorrow suddenly felt much closer than it had a minute ago.)

**End of Chapter 1**

# The Weight of Belief

(The next afternoon, the Psychology lecture ended as usual. Students packed their bags while conversations quickly filled the classroom.

Rudhika remained seated.

She wasn't writing notes.

Instead, she was thinking about yesterday's homework.

She had spent the entire evening quietly observing people.

On the bus to college, two strangers argued over politics.

Neither seemed interested in understanding the other.

Both wanted to win.

Even in the college canteen that morning, she had watched two classmates debate whether artificial intelligence would replace teachers. Within minutes, the discussion had turned personal.

It wasn't about ideas anymore.

It was about proving who was right.

(The final bell rang.)

Students slowly left the classroom.

Professor Vinay closed his attendance register and smiled as he noticed Rudhika waiting patiently near the front desk.)

**Professor Vinay**: (Picking up his notebook.) I see someone has completed her homework.

**Rudhika**: (Smiling shyly.) I think so.

**Professor Vinay**: "Think so?"

**Rudhika**: I noticed something… but I'm not sure if I understood it correctly.

**Professor Vinay**: That's the best kind of observation.

(They stepped out of the classroom together.

The weather was completely different from yesterday.

The rain had disappeared, leaving behind a bright blue sky and a gentle afternoon breeze.

As they walked toward the college garden, Rudhika opened her notebook.

Several pages were filled with small observations.

Vinay glanced at them and raised an eyebrow.)

**Professor Vinay**: You took notes?

**Rudhika**: (Embarrassed.) I didn't want to forget anything.

**Professor Vinay**: (Smiling.) Psychology begins with observation.

So…

What did you discover?

(Rudhika took a slow breath.)

**Rudhika**: I think…

people don't actually argue because they want the truth.

They argue because they want to be right.

(Vinay didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he looked at the trees lining the garden path. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves, and for a few moments, the only sound between them was the chirping of birds.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's an interesting observation.

(Rudhika waited quietly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Now tell me something.

Do *you* always want the truth?

(Rudhika looked confused.)

**Rudhika**: Of course.

**Professor Vinay**: Always?

**Rudhika**: (She thought for a moment.) I… I think so.

**Professor Vinay**: Good.

Let's test that.

(He sat down on a wooden bench beneath a large banyan tree and gestured for Rudhika to sit beside him.)

**Professor Vinay**: Imagine you've spent an entire week preparing a presentation.

You work hard.

You practice every night.

You're proud of it.

Then, just before you present, one of your classmates points out a mistake you've made.

How would you feel?

(Rudhika answered almost instantly.)

**Rudhika**: Embarrassed.

**Professor Vinay**: Why?

**Rudhika**: Because everyone would know I was wrong.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Notice something.

The mistake existed before your classmate mentioned it.

But it only began to hurt after someone exposed it.

(Rudhika's expression slowly changed.)

**Professor Vinay**: So was the pain caused by the mistake…

or by the fact that your image of yourself was challenged?

(Rudhika remained silent.)

She replayed the situation in her mind.

If she had discovered the mistake herself at home, she would have simply corrected it.

But if someone pointed it out in front of everyone…

it felt different.

Much different.

**Rudhika**: (Quietly.) My image…

**Professor Vinay**: Good.

Now we're getting somewhere.

(He smiled, not because she had given the correct answer, but because she had genuinely thought about it.)

**Professor Vinay**: Most arguments aren't battles between ideas.

They're battles between identities.

(Rudhika frowned.)

**Rudhika**: Identities?

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

if I say,

"The sky is blue,"

and you disagree…

would you be offended?

**Rudhika**: Probably not.

**Professor Vinay**: Why not?

**Rudhika**: Because… it doesn't really matter to me.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Now imagine I insult someone you deeply admire.

Or criticize a belief you've held since childhood.

Would your reaction be the same?

(Rudhika instinctively shook her head.)

**Professor Vinay**: Why?

(Rudhika searched for the answer.)

**Rudhika**: Because…

it would feel personal.

**Professor Vinay**: There it is.

(He gently tapped the notebook resting on her lap.)

**Professor Vinay**: The moment an idea becomes part of our identity…

questioning the idea begins to feel like questioning *us*.

That's why calm discussions suddenly become emotional.

People think they're defending an opinion.

Often…

they're defending themselves.

(Rudhika looked down at her notebook.)

She slowly wrote a single sentence.

"When beliefs become identity, disagreement feels like an attack."

(Vinay noticed what she had written and smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's a sentence worth remembering.

(Rudhika looked up.)

**Rudhika**: Professor…

does that mean we should never become attached to our beliefs?

(Vinay's smile grew slightly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Ah…

Now that's a dangerous question.

(The corners of Rudhika's lips curled into a small smile.)

She had begun to recognize that whenever Professor Vinay called a question "dangerous," it usually led to one of his most interesting conversations.)

(Vinay leaned back against the bench, watching a few students walk across the garden. Two of them were discussing an assignment, each insisting their solution was correct.)

**Professor Vinay**: Before I answer your question…

look over there.

(Rudhika followed his gaze.)

Two students had stopped near the pathway.

One pointed repeatedly at a notebook while the other shook his head.

Neither seemed willing to listen.

**Professor Vinay**: What do you think they're trying to do?

**Rudhika**: Convince each other.

**Professor Vinay**: Are they?

(Rudhika watched for another few seconds.)

One student interrupted before the other could finish speaking.

The second immediately interrupted back.

Neither paused to consider what the other was saying.

**Rudhika**: (Smiling faintly.) No…

They aren't listening at all.

**Professor Vinay**: Then why are they talking?

(Rudhika folded her arms.)

**Rudhika**: To prove they're right.

**Professor Vinay**: Good.

Now tell me…

if one of them suddenly realizes he's wrong…

what's the easiest thing to do?

**Rudhika**: Admit it.

**Professor Vinay**: (Grinning.) That's the wisest thing to do.

I asked for the easiest.

(Rudhika thought again.)

**Rudhika**: …

Pretend the other person is wrong?

**Professor Vinay**: Better.

Anything easier?

(She frowned.)

**Professor Vinay**: Blame.

Change the topic.

Attack the person.

Ignore the evidence.

Walk away.

There are countless ways to protect an opinion.

There's only one way to correct it.

(Rudhika slowly nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Our minds are remarkable.

They don't simply search for truth.

Very often…

they search for comfort.

(The sentence lingered.)

**Rudhika**: Comfort?

**Professor Vinay**: Imagine someone has believed something for twenty years.

Now imagine you prove, beyond any doubt, that it's false.

What have you taken away from them?

**Rudhika**: Their belief.

**Professor Vinay**: Only that?

(Rudhika hesitated.)

**Professor Vinay**: Perhaps you've also taken away years of certainty.

Perhaps memories connected to that belief.

Perhaps the feeling that they understood the world.

Sometimes…

people aren't defending an idea.

They're defending the world that idea helped them build.

(Rudhika remained quiet.)

She had never thought of beliefs that way.

**Professor Vinay**: That's why changing someone's mind is rarely an intellectual event.

It's often an emotional one.

(A gentle silence settled between them.)

Rudhika looked down at the sentence she had written earlier.

"When beliefs become identity, disagreement feels like an attack."

She underlined it.

Then she looked up.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

Have you ever changed one of your own deeply held beliefs?

(Vinay didn't answer immediately.)

Instead…

he smiled.

Not because the question was easy.

But because it reminded him of a younger version of himself.

**Professor Vinay**: Yes.

And it was one of the most uncomfortable experiences of my life.

(Rudhika leaned forward with genuine curiosity.)

**Rudhika**: What happened?

(Vinay looked toward the old psychology building across the garden.)

**Professor Vinay**: That…

is a story worth telling.

(Vinay rested both hands on the walking stick beside the bench. His eyes remained fixed on the old psychology building.)

**Professor Vinay**: When I was in my second year of college…

I believed something with absolute confidence.

Not because I had examined it carefully.

But because everyone around me believed it.

(Rudhika listened quietly.)

**Professor Vinay**: One afternoon, I was discussing it with one of my professors.

I was convinced I was right.

I spoke with confidence.

I quoted books.

I even thought I had won the argument.

**Rudhika**: What did your professor say?

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Almost nothing.

(Rudhika looked puzzled.)

**Professor Vinay**: He didn't tell me I was wrong.

He didn't laugh at me.

He didn't embarrass me.

He simply asked…

"If someone proved this belief false tomorrow…

what evidence would convince you?"

(Rudhika blinked.)

**Professor Vinay**: I opened my mouth…

and realized I had no answer.

(The memory still seemed vivid to him.)

**Professor Vinay**: Then he asked another question.

“What evidence would make you change your mind?”

I couldn’t answer that either.

Because the truth was…

I wasn’t searching for truth.

I was searching for confirmation.

(Rudhika slowly repeated the sentence to herself.)

**Rudhika**: Confirmation…

**Professor Vinay**: Yes.

I wasn’t asking,

“Is this true?”

I was asking,

“How can I prove I’m already right?”

There’s a world of difference between those two questions.

(A breeze carried a few dry leaves across the pathway.)

Rudhika wrote the sentence carefully in her notebook.

Then she looked up.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

how do we know which one we’re searching for?

Truth…

or confirmation?

(Vinay nodded with approval.)

**Professor Vinay**: That’s a beautiful question.

In fact…

it’s one every thinker should ask themselves regularly.

(He picked up a fallen leaf from the ground.)

It was small.

Fresh.

Bright green.

He held it between his fingers.

**Professor Vinay**: Suppose I tell you…

this leaf is blue.

(Rudhika laughed.)

**Rudhika**: But it isn't.

**Professor Vinay**: How do you know?

**Rudhika**: Because I can see it.

**Professor Vinay**: Good.

Should you believe me simply because I'm your professor?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Should you reject what I say simply because I happen to be wrong this time?

**Rudhika**: No…

**Professor Vinay**: Then what should you do?

(Rudhika looked at the leaf again.)

A smile slowly appeared on her face.

**Rudhika**: Look at the leaf.

Not at the person holding it.

(Vinay's smile widened.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Truth doesn't belong to professors.

It doesn't belong to famous people.

It doesn't belong to traditions.

It doesn't belong to you.

It belongs only to reality.

Our job…

is to keep adjusting our beliefs until they match reality as closely as possible.

Not the other way around.

(Rudhika stared at the leaf for a long moment.)

Something about such a simple example made the idea feel surprisingly profound.

**Rudhika**: Then…

if someone wants to help another person discover the truth…

how should they do it?

Should they point out the mistake directly?

Or stay silent?

(Vinay gently placed the leaf back on the grass.)

**Professor Vinay**: Ah…

Now you've asked the question most people get wrong.

(Rudhika tilted her head.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

have you ever changed your opinion because someone shouted at you?

**Rudhika**: (Laughing softly.) Never.

**Professor Vinay**: Have you ever changed your mind because someone mocked you?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Neither have I.

Very few people have.

People rarely open their minds…

while they're busy protecting their pride.

(The afternoon breeze fell still.)

**Professor Vinay**: If your goal is to defeat someone…

you may win the argument.

If your goal is to help someone see more clearly…

then making them feel respected is far more important than making them feel defeated.

(Rudhika closed her notebook.)

She wasn't writing anymore.

She was simply listening.

**Professor Vinay**: Never begin with,

"You're wrong."

Begin with,

"Help me understand how you reached that conclusion."

Because the moment people feel understood…

they become far more willing to understand you.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: So…

the first step to changing someone's mind…

isn't speaking.

It’s listening.

(Vinay looked at her with quiet satisfaction.)

**Professor Vinay**: Precisely.

And that…

is where the search for truth truly begins.

(Rudhika remained silent for a few moments.

Her fingers traced absentmindedly over the edge of her notebook.

She looked thoughtful…

but not entirely convinced.)

**Rudhika**: Professor…

may I disagree with you?

(Vinay looked at her and smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: I was beginning to worry you wouldn’t.

(Rudhika laughed.)

The nervousness she usually carried around him had begun to fade.

**Rudhika**: You said we should begin by understanding people…

listening to them…

respecting them.

But…

what if they’re obviously wrong?

What if they’re spreading something completely false?

Shouldn’t we correct them immediately?

(Vinay folded his arms.)

Instead of answering…

he asked another question.

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

have you ever tried pushing a door…

that says “Pull”?

(Rudhika looked confused.)

**Rudhika**: Yes.

**Professor Vinay**: What happened?

**Rudhika**: Nothing.

**Professor Vinay**: Did pushing harder help?

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Why not?

**Rudhika**: Because…

I was using the wrong approach.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Many people treat conversations the same way.

The harder the other person resists…

the harder they push.

Louder voice.

Stronger words.

More evidence.

More accusations.

And then they wonder why nothing changes.

(Rudhika thought back to the arguments she had observed the whole day.)

**Professor Vinay**: Winning an argument…

and opening a mind…

are often two very different skills.

(A pair of butterflies drifted across the garden, landing briefly on a flowering bush before fluttering away.)

**Rudhika**: So if facts aren't enough…

what is?

(Vinay picked up a small pebble from the ground.)

He placed it gently in Rudhika's palm.

**Professor Vinay**: Hold this.

(She looked at the pebble curiously.)

**Professor Vinay**: Imagine this pebble is one of your beliefs.

Close your hand.

(Rudhika closed her fingers around it.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tighter.

(She squeezed.)

**Professor Vinay**: Now imagine I try to take it from you by force.

What would you do?

**Rudhika**: I'd hold it tighter.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

The more force I use…

the tighter you grip.

(He paused.)

**Professor Vinay**: Now imagine instead…

I simply ask,

“Would you mind showing me the pebble?”

Would your hand still be as tight?

(Rudhika slowly relaxed her fingers.)

She opened her hand without even realizing she had done so.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: That’s the difference between force…

and curiosity.

Force closes the hand.

Curiosity opens it.

(Rudhika stared at the pebble resting quietly in her palm.)

Something so ordinary…

had suddenly become unforgettable.

**Rudhika**: (Softly.)

So people don’t cling to beliefs…

because the beliefs are always strong.

Sometimes…

they cling because someone is trying to snatch them away.

(Vinay’s eyes lit up.)

He didn’t say “Correct.”

He simply nodded.

The best answers, he believed, were the ones students discovered themselves.

(A comfortable silence settled between them.)

Then, after a minute, Rudhika asked quietly,

**Rudhika**: Professor…

have you ever failed?

I mean…

have you ever tried to help someone understand…

and completely failed?

(Vinay looked toward the horizon.

His smile faded not into sadness…

but into reflection.)

**Professor Vinay**: More times than I can count.

And every one of those failures taught me something…

about human nature.

(Rudhika leaned forward.)

(Vinay took a slow breath.)

**Professor Vinay**: Let me tell you about the hardest conversation I've ever had…

(Vinay looked down at the pebble that still rested in Rudhika's hand.)

**Professor Vinay**: This happened several years ago.

One of my closest friends believed something that simply wasn't true.

I had evidence.

Research papers.

Experts.

Examples.

I thought changing his mind would be easy.

(Rudhika listened without interrupting.)

**Professor Vinay**: We sat together one evening for almost three hours.

I explained everything carefully.

Whenever he raised a point…

I answered it.

Whenever he doubted something…

I found another source.

By the time we finished…

I was convinced I had presented an airtight case.

**Rudhika**: Did he change his mind?

(Vinay smiled weakly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Not at all.

In fact…

he became even more certain that he was right.

(Rudhika looked surprised.)

**Rudhika**: But… why?

You had evidence.

**Professor Vinay**: I had something more dangerous than evidence.

**Rudhika**: What?

**Professor Vinay**: The desire to win.

(The words caught Rudhika off guard.)

**Professor Vinay**: I wasn't trying to understand him anymore.

I was trying to defeat his arguments.

Every answer I gave made him feel cornered.

Every piece of evidence sounded like another attack.

He stopped listening.

Not because the evidence was weak…

but because he no longer felt safe enough to consider it.

(Rudhika looked down thoughtfully.)

**Professor Vinay**: We didn't speak for several weeks after that conversation.

Not because either of us hated the other.

Because neither of us felt heard.

(A quiet silence settled over the garden.)

A squirrel darted across the path, disappearing into the roots of the banyan tree.

**Rudhika**: Did you ever talk about it again?

**Professor Vinay**: Yes.

Months later.

But something was different.

**Rudhika**: What changed?

**Professor Vinay**: Me.

(Rudhika looked up.)

**Professor Vinay**: The second time we met…

I made a promise to myself.

I wouldn't mention a single piece of evidence for the first half hour.

**Rudhika** blinked.

**Rudhika**: Then… what did you talk about?

**Professor Vinay**: Him.

His experiences.

His reasons.

His fears.

His questions.

I wanted to understand not only *what* he believed…

but *why* he believed it.

**Rudhika**: And?

**Professor Vinay**: I discovered something I had completely missed the first time.

His belief wasn't built on facts.

It was built on an experience from his childhood.

As long as I kept attacking the belief…

I was unknowingly attacking a memory that meant a great deal to him.

(Rudhika slowly nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's when I realized something.

Facts explain what people think.

Stories often explain why.

If you ignore the story…

the facts rarely find a place to stay.

(Rudhika wrote that sentence carefully in her notebook.)

She underlined it twice.

Then she closed the notebook.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

does that mean emotions are more important than facts?

(Vinay chuckled.)

**Professor Vinay**: No.

Facts help us discover reality.

Emotions help us understand people.

If you neglect either one…

your conversation becomes incomplete.

(He stood from the bench and brushed a few leaves from his trousers.)

**Professor Vinay**: Truth is discovered with the mind.

But it is often reached through the heart.

(Rudhika quietly repeated the sentence to herself.)

It was the kind of thought she knew she would remember long after today's conversation ended.

**End of Chapter 2**

# When Words Become Weapons

(The next morning, the college campus buzzed with its usual energy.

Students hurried between lectures.

Some laughed with friends.

Others rushed toward classrooms, hoping they weren't late.

As Rudhika walked down the main corridor carrying her psychology notebook, raised voices caught her attention.)

A small crowd had gathered nearby.

Two students stood face to face.

One tried to explain something.

The other wasn't listening.

Instead…

he laughed.

"Oh, so now you're pretending to be an expert?"

Several students around them chuckled.

The first student's face reddened.

He tried to speak again.

Before he could finish…

the other interrupted.

"Stop embarrassing yourself."

More laughter.

(The conversation ended before it ever had a chance to begin.)

The first student quietly picked up his notebook and walked away.

The crowd slowly dispersed.

No one seemed particularly affected.

Except Rudhika.

(She stood there for several seconds.)

She hadn't been the one insulted.

Yet something about the scene made her uncomfortable.

It wasn't disagreement.

It wasn't criticism.

It was the enjoyment of humiliating another person.

(The incident stayed in her mind throughout the day.)

When Professor Vinay's psychology lecture ended, she waited as she always did until the other students had left.

(Vinay noticed the thoughtful expression on her face before she spoke.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's the same expression you had after yesterday's class.

**Rudhika**: (Smiling faintly.) Is it that obvious?

**Professor Vinay**: I'm a psychology professor.

Noticing things is part of the job.

(Rudhika laughed softly, but the smile quickly faded.)

They stepped into the corridor.

For a few moments, neither of them spoke.

Finally…

Rudhika broke the silence.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

Yesterday we talked about people who genuinely believe they're right.

People who defend their beliefs because they think they're protecting the truth.

(Vinay nodded.)

Rudhika stopped walking.

**Rudhika**: But what about people…

who don't seem interested in truth at all?

People who interrupt…

mock…

insult…

or humiliate others…

not because they're searching for understanding…

but simply because they enjoy hurting people.

(She looked directly at him.)

**Rudhika**: How do we deal with people who don't respect us enough to even have an honest conversation?

(Vinay remained silent for a few moments.

He didn't seem surprised by the question.

Instead…

he looked at the empty corridor stretching ahead of them.)

**Professor Vinay**: Before I answer…

tell me something.

When that student was being insulted this morning…

who did you feel sorry for?

(Rudhika answered without hesitation.)

**Rudhika**: The student who was being mocked.

**Professor Vinay**: Naturally.

And what did you feel toward the other student?

**Rudhika**: Honestly?

**Professor Vinay**: Always.

**Rudhika**: I was angry.

He wasn't even trying to understand.

He just wanted everyone to laugh.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's a very human reaction.

But let me ask you another question.

Who controlled your emotions today?

(Rudhika frowned.)

**Rudhika**: What do you mean?

**Professor Vinay**: You weren't part of the argument.

Yet someone else's behavior occupied your thoughts for hours.

(Rudhika became quiet.)

**Professor Vinay**: Think carefully.

Who decided how you would feel today?

The student…

or you?

(Rudhika looked down.)

She wanted to say, "I did."

But it didn't feel completely true.

(Vinay noticed her hesitation.)

**Professor Vinay**: Most people believe insults hurt because of the words themselves.

But words are only sounds…

until our minds give them meaning.

(Rudhika looked up.)

**Rudhika**: But Professor…

some words *do* hurt.

**Professor Vinay**: They do.

I'm not denying that.

I'm asking…

*why* they hurt.

(The question lingered.)

(Vinay bent down and picked up a dry twig from the ground.

He held it out toward Rudhika.)

**Professor Vinay**: If I call this twig…

a diamond…

does it become one?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Why not?

**Rudhika**: Because calling something by another name doesn't change what it is.

(Vinay smiled.)

Then he gently pointed the twig toward her.

**Professor Vinay**: Suppose I call you…

“worthless.”

Does that sentence change who you are?

(Rudhika instinctively shook her head.)

**Rudhika**: No…

**Professor Vinay**: Does it change your abilities?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Your character?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Your kindness?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Then what has actually changed?

(Rudhika remained silent.)

**Professor Vinay**: Only this…

Someone has expressed an opinion.

Nothing more.

Nothing less.

(Rudhika wasn’t fully convinced.)

**Rudhika**: But if it’s only an opinion…

why does it feel so real?

(Vinay’s expression softened.)

**Professor Vinay**: Because we’re social beings.

From childhood…

our brains learn to care deeply about how others see us.

Acceptance once meant survival.

Rejection once meant danger.

Even today…

a harsh insult can awaken emotions that are thousands of years older than civilization itself.

So if insults affect you…

it doesn't mean you're weak.

It means you're human.

(Rudhika let out a slow breath.)

For some reason…

hearing that made her feel lighter.

**Professor Vinay**: But being human…

doesn't mean remaining helpless.

That's where wisdom begins.

(Rudhika looked at him with renewed curiosity.)

**Rudhika**: Then…

how do we become wiser than our first reaction?

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: By asking one question before reacting.

Just one.

(Rudhika waited.)

**Professor Vinay**: "Is this person trying to help me…

or merely trying to hurt me?"

Because those are two very different conversations.

And they deserve two very different responses.

(Rudhika walked quietly beside Professor Vinay.

Students passed by them in both directions, but neither of them seemed to notice.

Her mind was entirely occupied by one thought.)

**Rudhika**: Professor…

how do I know which one it is?

Whether someone is trying to help me…

or simply trying to hurt me?

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Excellent.

That's exactly the question you should ask.

Not…

"Does this hurt?"

But…

"What is this person's intention?"

(Rudhika nodded slowly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Let me give you a simple test.

Imagine two different people say exactly the same sentence to you.

"Your presentation wasn't very clear."

Should you react the same way to both?

**Rudhika**: I suppose… yes?

**Professor Vinay**: Let's see.

Imagine the first person is your closest friend.

After everyone leaves, they quietly tell you,

“I know you worked hard.

I just think you explained the second topic too quickly.”

Why did they wait until everyone left?

**Rudhika**: Because they didn’t want to embarrass me.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Now imagine another student says the same thing.

But this time…

they say it loudly in front of the whole class.

Then they laugh.

Did the words change?

(Rudhika thought for a moment.)

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Then what changed?

**Rudhika**: The intention.

**Professor Vinay**: Precisely.

One person wanted to improve you.

The other wanted to display you.

One corrected.

The other humiliated.

Never confuse the two.

(Rudhika wrote another sentence in her notebook.)

“Judge criticism by its intention, not only by its words.”

(Vinay glanced at the page.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's a good sentence.

But let's make it even better.

(Rudhika looked up.)

**Professor Vinay**: Sometimes…

even a person with good intentions can be mistaken.

And sometimes…

a rude person accidentally speaks the truth.

(Rudhika blinked.)

**Rudhika**: I never thought of that.

**Professor Vinay**: That's why wise people ask two separate questions.

First…

"Is it true?"

Second…

"How was it said?"

Never reverse the order.

(Rudhika frowned.)

**Rudhika**: Why?

(Vinay stopped walking.)

He looked at the flowerbed beside the pathway.

A rose bush grew there.

Beautiful flowers.

Sharp thorns.

He gently pointed toward it.

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

would you refuse a rose…

simply because it has thorns?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Would you grab the thorns…

because they're attached to a rose?

(Rudhika laughed.)

**Rudhika**: Of course not.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Take the flower.

Leave the thorns.

If criticism contains truth…

keep the truth.

Leave the cruelty behind.

If it contains only cruelty…

there's nothing to carry home.

(Rudhika smiled.)

She looked at the rose bush differently now.

**Professor Vinay**: The mistake many people make…

is carrying the thorns for years…

while leaving the flower behind.

(A gentle breeze carried the fragrance of the roses through the garden.)

For a few moments…

neither of them spoke.

Then Rudhika asked quietly,

**Rudhika**: Professor…

what if the person insulting me is someone I love?

A friend…

a parent…

or someone whose opinion matters to me?

Doesn't that make it much harder?

(Vinay's expression grew thoughtful.)

He nodded slowly.

**Professor Vinay**: Yes.

Much harder.

Because strangers can insult your ears.

But people you love…

can reach your heart.

(He looked at Rudhika with unusual seriousness.)

**Professor Vinay**: And that's where psychology alone isn't enough.

That conversation requires compassion…

boundaries…

and sometimes…

forgiveness.

(Rudhika sensed that this answer came not from a textbook…

but from experience.)

She closed her notebook.

She knew today's lesson was far from over.

(The afternoon sun had begun its slow descent.

Long shadows stretched across the garden paths.)

(Rudhika walked in silence.

She replayed every sentence Professor Vinay had spoken.

She understood them.

At least…

she thought she did.

Yet one question refused to leave her mind.)

**Rudhika**: Professor…

may I be honest?

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: I would be disappointed if you weren't.

(Rudhika took a slow breath.)

**Rudhika**: I understand everything you've said.

I really do.

But…

it still hurts.

Even when I know someone is wrong.

Even when I know they're only trying to insult me…

it still hurts.

Why?

(Vinay's smile faded into a thoughtful expression.)

For several seconds…

he didn't answer.

Instead, he looked toward the horizon where the golden sunlight filtered

through the trees.

**Professor Vinay**: Rudhika…

have you ever fallen while learning to ride a bicycle?

**Rudhika**: (Surprised.)

Many times.

**Professor Vinay**: Did knowing it was only a fall…

stop your knees from hurting?

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Understanding pain…

doesn't erase pain.

It simply helps you respond to it more wisely.

(Rudhika listened carefully.)

**Professor Vinay**: Psychology is often misunderstood.

People think it teaches us how to stop feeling.

It doesn't.

It teaches us how not to become prisoners of our feelings.

(The sentence lingered.)

**Rudhika**: So…

feeling hurt isn't failure?

**Professor Vinay**: Not at all.

Feeling is automatic.

What you do next…

is your choice.

(A young boy chased a football across the college ground nearby.

He stumbled…

fell…

and immediately looked around.)

Rudhika noticed something.

The boy wasn't checking his scraped knee.

He was checking whether anyone had seen him fall.

She smiled.

(Vinay noticed.)

**Professor Vinay**: What did you just observe?

**Rudhika**: He didn't care about the injury first.

He cared about being embarrassed.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's a psychologist's observation.

(Rudhika couldn't hide her smile.)

**Professor Vinay**: Sometimes…

the wound isn't nearly as painful…

as the story we tell ourselves about the wound.

(Rudhika repeated the sentence softly.)

"The story we tell ourselves…"

**Professor Vinay**: Imagine two people hear exactly the same insult.

One thinks,

"Maybe they're right.

I'm worthless."

The other thinks,

"That was unkind.

I wonder why they're so angry."

Same words.

Different stories.

Different suffering.

(Rudhika slowed her pace.)

She had never separated the insult…

from the story that followed it.

**Professor Vinay**: We rarely suffer only because of what happened.

We also suffer because of the meaning we attach to what happened.

(Rudhika stopped walking.)

**Rudhika**: Then…

is changing the story…

the same as lying to ourselves?

(Vinay smiled.)

A pleased smile.

Not because the question was easy.

But because it was exactly the right question.

**Professor Vinay**: No.

Lying ignores reality.

Wisdom looks at reality…

without adding unnecessary suffering.

If someone insults you…

the reality is,

“They insulted me.”

The unnecessary story is,

“Therefore, I have no value.”

Those are not the same sentence.

(Rudhika looked down.

She realized how often she had unknowingly joined those two sentences together.)

The breeze gently turned a page of her notebook.

On the page were all the lessons she had written over the last two days.

Questions.

Observations.

Ideas.

She smiled quietly.

Perhaps…

she wasn’t only learning psychology anymore.

Perhaps…

she was learning how to understand herself.

(Vinay noticed the thoughtful look on Rudhika’s face.

He slowed his pace.)

**Professor Vinay**: There’s something else you should know.

(Rudhika looked up.)

**Professor Vinay**: The same words can affect two people very differently.

One person hears an insult…

shrugs…

and moves on.

Another carries those same words for years.

**Rudhika**: Why?

**Professor Vinay**: Because pain isn't measured only by what is said.

It's also shaped by who we are…

how we were raised…

what we've experienced…

what we've lost…

and what we've learned to believe about ourselves.

(Rudhika listened quietly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Psychology can explain a great deal about human behavior.

But no theory can completely explain a person.

Every individual carries a different story.

Different memories.

Different wounds.

Different strengths.

That's why understanding someone begins long before giving them advice.

(Rudhika lowered her eyes.

His words felt strangely personal.)

**Professor Vinay**: Which is why…

I don't think our next conversation should be about "people."

I think…

it should be about you.

(Rudhika looked up almost immediately.)

**Rudhika**: M-me?

(Vinay smiled gently.)

**Professor Vinay**: Yes.

You've spent the last few days trying to understand the human mind.

Tomorrow…

if you're comfortable with it…

I'd like to understand yours.

(Rudhika didn't know what to say.)

For a brief moment, the world around her seemed unusually quiet.

Students walked past them.

A bicycle bell rang in the distance.

Someone called out to a friend across the courtyard.

Yet all of it faded into the background.

No one had ever asked to understand her before.

People had asked about her grades.

Her attendance.

Her assignments.

Her future.

But never…

her.

(A faint warmth spread across her cheeks.)

She quickly looked away, pretending to adjust the strap of her bag.

**Rudhika**: (Softly.) I… I don't know if my story is interesting.

**Professor Vinay**: (With a kind smile.) Every mind is interesting.

The question is whether someone is patient enough to listen.

(Rudhika felt an unfamiliar feeling.

It wasn't embarrassment alone.

It was relief.)

(Vinay glanced at his watch.)

**Professor Vinay**: It's getting late.

Let's continue tomorrow.

No theories.

No textbooks.

Just a conversation.

(Rudhika nodded.)

This time, her smile came effortlessly.

(As Professor Vinay walked toward the faculty building, Rudhika remained where she was for a few moments.

The garden was beginning to empty.

She looked down at her notebook.

For the first time since buying it…

she wondered whether the next page would contain lessons from a professor…

or pieces of her own life.

She gently closed the notebook and walked toward the college gate.

Tomorrow no longer felt like another class.

It felt like the beginning of being understood.)

**End of Chapter 3**

# The Walls We Build

(The following afternoon, the college campus was quieter than usual.

Clouds drifted lazily across the sky, casting moving shadows over the garden where Professor Vinay and Rudhika had met every day that week.

For the first time…

neither of them carried a psychology textbook.

Only Rudhika held a small notebook against her chest.)

(Vinay was already sitting on the wooden bench beneath the banyan tree.

When he saw Rudhika approaching, he smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Right on time.

(Rudhika smiled faintly as she sat beside him.)

For a while…

neither of them spoke.

There was no awkwardness.

Only silence.

The kind of silence that exists between two people who don't feel the need to fill every moment with words.

A cool breeze stirred the leaves overhead.

Somewhere nearby, a wind chime hanging outside the horticulture department rang softly.

Finally…

Vinay spoke.

**Professor Vinay**: Yesterday I promised that today wouldn't be about theories.

It would be about you.

(Rudhika nodded.)

She looked down at her notebook.

Its pages were filled with observations from the previous days.

Yet today…

she hadn't written a single word.

**Professor Vinay**: May I ask you something?

**Rudhika**: (Looking up.) Of course.

**Professor Vinay**: Why do you always sit alone after class?

(Rudhika blinked.)

She hadn't expected that question.

**Rudhika**: I…

I don't know.

**Professor Vinay**: Really?

Or have you simply never thought about it?

(Rudhika remained quiet.)

She searched for an answer.

At first…

nothing came.

Then…

small memories began surfacing.

Eating lunch alone.

Watching other students from a distance.

Leaving class before anyone could start a conversation.

Politely declining invitations.

Always choosing the corner seat.

Always.

**Rudhika**: (Softly.)

I guess…

it's become a habit.

**Professor Vinay**: Habits usually have beginnings.

(Rudhika looked away.)

(Vinay didn't continue.

He simply waited.

The silence wasn't uncomfortable.

It was patient.)

After nearly a minute…

Rudhika finally spoke.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

have you ever noticed how some stray dogs behave?

(Vinay looked at her with curiosity.)

**Rudhika**: If they've always been loved…

they'll happily run toward anyone.

But if they've been beaten over and over again…

even someone trying to feed them has to earn their trust.

(Vinay didn't interrupt.)

(Rudhika gave a small, almost embarrassed smile.)

**Rudhika**: I think…

people can become like that too.

(Those words seemed to surprise even her.

She had never described herself that way before.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's a thoughtful observation.

Do you think you've stopped trusting people…

or have you stopped expecting kindness from them?

(Rudhika felt the question settle somewhere deep inside her.)

She wanted to answer immediately.

But she couldn't.

Because she wasn't sure.

For several moments…

she simply stared at the grass beneath her feet.

Then…

very quietly…

she spoke.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

I never really knew my parents.

(Vinay's expression softened.

He didn't say he was sorry.

He didn't interrupt.

He simply listened.)

**Rudhika**: They died in an accident when I was still a toddler.

I don’t remember their faces.

I don’t remember their voices.

Sometimes…

I wonder what it would have felt like…

to remember being hugged by them.

(The words came slowly.

As if they had been waiting years to be spoken.)

**Rudhika**: My elder sister raised me.

She was still a child herself.

But somehow…

she became everything.

She wasn’t just my sister.

She became my family.

(She smiled faintly.)

Everything gentle in my life…

came from her.

(The smile slowly disappeared.)

**Rudhika**: We lived with our grandparents.

People always say grandparents spoil their grandchildren.

(Oddly…

that sentence made Rudhika laugh.

But there was no joy in it.)

**Rudhika**: That wasn’t our story.

(Vinay remained completely still.

He could sense that what came next carried years of silence.)

(Rudhika took a slow, trembling breath.)

She looked at the empty page of her notebook.

**Rudhika**: There was one day…

when I learned…

that sometimes the people who are supposed to protect you…

can become the people you're most afraid of.

(She closed the notebook.)

Her fingers trembled ever so slightly.

(Vinay noticed.

He didn't ask her to continue.

He didn't tell her to "be strong."

He simply said,)

**Professor Vinay**: We have all the time you need.

(Rudhika looked at him.

For the first time in years…

she believed him.)

She drew another slow breath.

Then…

she began.

(Rudhika looked at the notebook resting in her hands.

She slowly traced a finger along its blank page.

When she finally spoke…

her voice was barely above a whisper.)

**Rudhika**: I think…

I should start with him.

Our cousin.

(For a brief moment, she wondered if she should even continue.

Then she remembered Professor Vinay's words.

*"We have all the time you need."*

She took another breath.)

**Rudhika**: My sister and I lived with our grandparents after our parents died.

There was also our cousin.

He was around my age.

Maybe a little older.

Everyone adored him.

Whatever he did…

someone had an excuse for it.

If my sister or I made a mistake…

it became a crime.

(Vinay listened without interrupting.)

**Rudhika**: When I was little…

I didn't understand favoritism.

I just thought…

maybe I wasn't trying hard enough.

Maybe if I behaved better…

they would love me too.

(She gave a quiet laugh.)

Children are strange.

They always think they are responsible for the weather inside a house.

(Vinay made a mental note of the sentence but didn't stop her.)

**Rudhika**: One afternoon…

my grandparents had gone out.

My sister wasn't home.

It was just me…

and him.

She had asked me to fold the freshly washed clothes.

I was happy to do it.

I wanted everything to be neat before they returned.

(She smiled faintly.)

I folded every piece carefully.

One by one.

I still remember checking each shirt twice…

because I didn't want anyone to complain.

(Her smile disappeared.)

Then…

without saying a word…

he picked up the pile of clothes…

and threw them over the balcony.

(The memory seemed to return with startling clarity.)

Rudhika stared at the ground.

Almost as though she were seeing the scattered clothes again.

**Rudhika**: I panicked.

I ran downstairs as fast as I could.

Some clothes had fallen into the dust.

Some were tangled in the plants.

I picked up every single one.

I dusted them with my hands.

I thought…

if I hurried…

maybe no one would know.

(She swallowed.)

When I came back upstairs…

he was waiting.

(For the first time since beginning her story…

her hands started trembling.)

**Rudhika**: He smiled.

Not because he was happy.

Because he knew something I didn't.

He stood in front of me and said…

"Good girl.

Now hand them to me again."

(Vinay remained silent.)

**Rudhika**: I begged him not to.

I told him Grandmother would be angry.

I told him we'd both get into trouble.

He only laughed.

Every time I pulled the clothes back…

he pulled harder.

Like it was a game.

Like my fear was entertaining.

(Her breathing became slower.)

**Rudhika**: I don't even remember deciding to do it.

My hand just…

moved.

I slapped him.

(The words hung in the air.)

**Rudhika**: It wasn't because I hated him.

It was because…

for one second…

I wanted the game to stop.

(She closed her eyes.)

Instead…

everything became worse.

He slapped me back immediately.

I remember it felt like my neck bend.

I remember falling.

I remember the ceiling spinning.

And then…

I remember lying on the floor.

Crying.

Not because of the slap.

Because I already knew…

what was going to happen next.

(Vinay's expression changed ever so slightly.)

He wasn't shocked.

He was listening with complete attention.

Rudhika continued.

**Rudhika**: A little while later…

my grandparents came home.

The clothes were still dirty.

I just get up from the floor.

He reached them before I could say a single word.

He told them I had thrown the clothes myself.

He told them I had hit him for no reason.

(She paused.)

I tried to explain.

I really tried.

But no one asked me what happened.

No one looked at me.

Their minds had already decided.

(The garden had become remarkably quiet.)

Even the sounds of students in the distance seemed to fade.

Rudhika looked down at her hands.

They had stopped trembling.

Not because the memory hurt less.

But because she had finally spoken it aloud.

**Rudhika**: That day…

their were already angry because of something...

they beat me so much that I thought I will gonna die.

My sister came between me and them.

She covered me with her own body and got beaten too.

If she hadn't…

I don't know what would have happened.

(Silence.)

A long silence.

Not empty.

Respectful.

Professor Vinay did not rush to comfort her.

He knew that some stories should be honored before they are answered.

Rudhika looked toward the old banyan tree.

For years…

she had carried this memory alone.

Today…

for the first time…

someone had listened without judging.

And somehow…

that changed the memory just a little.

(The breeze carried a few dry leaves across the stone pathway.

Neither of them spoke.

Several minutes passed.

Professor Vinay didn't seem interested in filling the silence.

He simply remained there.

Present.

Listening.)

(Rudhika wiped the corner of one eye before the tear could fall.)

**Rudhika**: I was fourteen.

Old enough to know what was happening.

Old enough to remember every second of it.

(She let out a quiet laugh.)

Sometimes people think painful memories disappear with time.

Mine became clearer.

(Vinay nodded gently.)

**Professor Vinay**: Memories tied to strong emotions often do.

Especially the ones our minds believe are important for survival.

(Rudhika looked toward the ground.)

**Rudhika**: After that…

I changed.

I stopped arguing.

I stopped explaining.

Whenever someone blamed me…

I just stayed quiet.

Because…

what was the point?

No one had listened that day.

Why would anyone listen later?

(Vinay listened carefully.)

**Rudhika**: I stopped trusting compliments too.

If someone was kind…

I kept waiting for them to become cruel.

If someone smiled…

I wondered what they wanted.

It felt…

safer to expect the worst.

(She looked embarrassed.)

**Rudhika**: That's probably why I stay away from people now.

It's easier to be alone.

If you don't let anyone close…

they can't hurt you.

(Professor Vinay folded his hands in his lap.)

He remained thoughtful for a moment.

Then he asked quietly,

**Professor Vinay**: May I ask you something?

**Rudhika**: Of course.

**Professor Vinay**: Imagine a fourteen-year-old girl came to my office tomorrow.

She sat exactly where you're sitting now.

And she told me the same story you just told me.

Every detail.

(He paused.)

**Professor Vinay**: Would you think she deserved what happened?

(Rudhika answered almost instantly.)

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Would you call her weak?

**Rudhika**: Never.

**Professor Vinay**: Would you tell her she should have known better?

Rudhika frowned.

**Rudhika**: No.

She was only trying to stop someone from tormenting her.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Then let me ask one last question.

Why does that kindness disappear…

when the fourteen-year-old is you?

(Rudhika opened her mouth to answer.

Nothing came out.)

For the first time…

she realized there were two versions of compassion inside her.

One for everyone else.

And another…

far harsher one for herself.

(Vinay didn't interrupt her thoughts.)

He knew some questions should echo before they're answered.

After nearly a minute, Rudhika spoke.

Very softly.

**Rudhika**: Because…

if I admit I didn't deserve it…

then I have to admit something even more frightening.

**Professor Vinay**: What is that?

(Her eyes filled again.)

**Rudhika**: That the people who were supposed to protect me…

chose not to.

(The words seemed to drain years of weight from her shoulders.)

Vinay didn't rush to respond.

Instead, he looked up at the branches of the banyan tree.

**Professor Vinay**: When we cannot make sense of another person's cruelty…

our minds often search for an explanation.

Especially when we're young.

Children and teenagers have very little control over the adults around them.

So the mind reaches for the one thing it *can* control.

"Often it decides…"

(He looked back at Rudhika.)

"…'It must be me.'

'If I were better…

quieter…

smarter…

more obedient…

maybe they would have loved me.’”

(Rudhika’s eyes widened.)

She had never spoken those thoughts aloud.

Yet somehow…

he had described them almost exactly.

**Professor Vinay**: Those conclusions can feel convincing.

Not because they’re true.

But because they give chaos a reason.

And a reason…

even a painful one…

can feel less frightening than believing the people around you acted unjustly.

(Rudhika sat quietly.

For years, she had believed that becoming invisible was wisdom.

Now, for the first time, she wondered whether it had simply been the safest way a frightened fourteen-year-old knew how to survive.)

The afternoon bell rang across the campus.

Neither of them moved.

Some conversations…

were more important than the timetable.

(The afternoon bell had long since faded.

The pathways that had been crowded an hour ago were now almost empty.

Only a few students remained scattered across the campus.)

(Rudhika leaned back against the bench.

She felt exhausted.

Not physically.

Emotionally.

As though she had been carrying a heavy box for years…

and had finally set it down.)

Neither of them spoke.

The silence no longer felt heavy.

It felt peaceful.

After several minutes, Professor Vinay spoke.

**Professor Vinay**: Thank you.

(Rudhika looked at him, surprised.)

**Rudhika**: For what?

**Professor Vinay**: For trusting me with your story.

Trust isn't given because someone is a professor.

It's given because someone feels safe.

I don't take that lightly.

(Rudhika lowered her eyes.)

She wasn't used to people thanking her for speaking.

Usually…

they thanked her for staying quiet.

Vinay continued.

**Professor Vinay**: May I share one observation?

Rudhika nodded.

**Professor Vinay**: Everything you've described…

your silence…

your hesitation…

your fear of getting close to people…

they all make sense.

Not because they're ideal.

But because somewhere in your life…

they protected you.

(Rudhika listened carefully.)

**Professor Vinay**: Imagine you're caught in a storm.

You build a small shelter to survive.

The shelter saves your life.

Years later…

the storm is over.

But you never leave.

What once protected you…

slowly becomes a prison.

(Rudhika looked toward the sky.)

The clouds had almost disappeared.

She smiled faintly.

**Rudhika**: So…

I'm still living inside the shelter.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Perhaps.

And perhaps that's alright.

You don't tear down a shelter overnight.

You first walk outside long enough to realize…

the storm isn't always there anymore.

(Rudhika quietly absorbed the thought.)

For the first time…

she didn't feel ashamed of the person she had become.

She saw a frightened fourteen-year-old…

doing her best to survive.

Maybe…

that girl deserved understanding…

not judgment.

A gentle breeze rustled the banyan leaves above them.

Rudhika watched them dance for a moment before speaking again.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

there's something I still don't understand.

(Vinay turned toward her.)

**Rudhika**: Why are people like that?

Why do some people enjoy hurting others?

Why are some homes filled with fear instead of love?

Why do people become so abusive?

Why do people hate someone simply because they're different…

or because they belong to another religion…

another caste…

another country…

another group?

Why does identity become more important than humanity?

(She paused.)

**Rudhika**: Were my grandparents always like that?

Was my cousin born that way?

Or…

did something make them become those people?

(The questions lingered in the evening air.)

Professor Vinay didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he looked across the campus where students from countless different backgrounds laughed together on the lawn.

Then he looked back at Rudhika.

A gentle smile crossed his face.

**Professor Vinay**: Those…

are some of the oldest questions in psychology.

And perhaps…

some of the oldest questions in human history.

(Rudhika waited.)

**Professor Vinay**: If I answer them in five minutes…

I'll only give you opinions.

They deserve something better.

They deserve careful thought.

(He stood, picking up the book he had brought but never opened.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tomorrow…

we'll begin exploring why people become who they become.

We'll talk about childhood…

learning…

fear…

identity…

power…

love…

and hate.

Not to excuse cruelty.

But to understand it.

Because understanding why something exists…

is the first step toward knowing how to prevent it.

(Rudhika stood as well.)

For the first time since she had entered college…

she wasn't looking forward to tomorrow because of a class.

She was looking forward to a conversation.

The sun slipped below the horizon.

Together…

they walked toward the college gate.

Not as a professor and his student.

But as two people…

trying to understand the human mind.

**End of Chapter 4**

# Beyond Labels

(The next morning…

the campus seemed unaware of the questions waiting beneath the old banyan tree.

Students hurried to lectures.

Some complained about assignments.

Some laughed over yesterday's jokes.

Life moved exactly as it always had.

Yet for Rudhika…

today felt different.

Today wasn't about remembering her past.

It was about understanding humanity.)

(Professor Vinay was already seated on the familiar wooden bench.

A notebook rested beside him.

Not a psychology textbook.

Just blank pages.)

(Rudhika approached.)

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Good morning.

**Rudhika**: Good morning, Professor.

(She sat beside him.)

Neither of them spoke immediately.

The breeze carried the scent of wet earth from last night's rain.

Finally…

Vinay opened the notebook.

On the first page he had written only one sentence.

**"To understand a person, first understand the forces that shaped them."**

He turned the notebook so Rudhika could read it.

**Professor Vinay**: Yesterday you asked me many difficult questions.

(Rudhika nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Do you remember them?

Rudhika smiled faintly.

**Rudhika**: Every one of them.

**Professor Vinay**: Good.

Then ask them again.

Sometimes…

important questions deserve to be heard twice.

(Rudhika looked toward the garden.)

She spoke slowly.

Almost exactly as she had the evening before.

**Rudhika**: Why are people like that?

Why do some people enjoy hurting others?

Why are some homes filled with fear instead of love?

Why do people become abusive?

Why do people hate others simply because they're different…

because they belong to another religion…

another caste…

another country…

another community?

Why does identity become more important than humanity?

(She paused.)

**Rudhika**: Were my grandparents always like that?

Was my cousin born that way?

Or…

did something make them become those people?

(The questions settled quietly between them.)

Professor Vinay remained silent for several moments.

Not because he lacked an answer.

But because some answers deserve a moment of respect before they are spoken.

Finally…

he asked a question of his own.

**Professor Vinay**: Rudhika…

when you were born…

could you speak Marathi?

She smiled.

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Could you walk?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Could you hate someone because of their religion?

(Rudhika frowned.)

**Rudhika**: Of course not.

**Professor Vinay**: Why not?

(Rudhika thought.)

**Rudhika**: Because…

I didn't know what religion was.

Vinay nodded.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

No child is born knowing caste.

Or politics.

Or nationality.

Or prejudice.

Those are learned.

Just as language is learned.

(Rudhika's attention sharpened.)

**Professor Vinay**: Human beings are born with certain natural tendencies.

The need to survive.

The need to belong.

The ability to feel fear.

The ability to love.

The ability to learn.

But *who* we become…

is shaped by an ongoing conversation between our biology…

our experiences…

our family…

our friends…

our teachers…

our culture…

and the choices we make.

(Rudhika wrote quickly.)

Vinay continued.

**Professor Vinay**: Psychology has a simple saying.

“Genes load the gun.

Environment aims it.

Choice pulls or refuses to pull the trigger.”

(Rudhika looked up.)

**Professor Vinay**: That doesn’t mean people have no responsibility.

Many people endure terrible childhoods…

and still choose kindness.

Others grow up surrounded by love…

yet become cruel.

Our past influences us.

It does not imprison us.

(Rudhika underlined the sentence.)

**Professor Vinay**: Your grandparents…

your cousin…

I cannot tell you exactly why they became who they were.

No psychologist can do that without truly knowing them.

But we can understand some of the forces that often shape people.

Power.

Fear.

Humiliation.

Neglect.

Learned behavior.

Sometimes…

people who grow up in homes where shouting is normal…

begin to believe shouting is communication.

People who grow up seeing violence…

may mistake violence for authority.

Children learn far more from what adults do…

than from what adults say.

(Rudhika remembered countless moments from her childhood.)

Vinay noticed.

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

if a child grows up watching adults solve every disagreement with insults…

what do you think that child learns?

(Rudhika answered quietly.)

**Rudhika**: That insults are normal.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

If love is never demonstrated…

how will the child recognize healthy love later?

If every mistake is punished with humiliation…

how will that child respond when someone else makes a mistake?

(Rudhika slowly understood.)

**Professor Vinay**: This is one reason psychologists pay so much attention to childhood.

Not because childhood decides everything.

But because it often writes the first draft of our beliefs about the world.

(The breeze gently turned another page of the notebook.)

Vinay looked at the blank page.

**Professor Vinay**: But your questions didn't end with abusive families.

They reached something even larger.

They reached humanity itself.

(Rudhika nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: So let me ask you another question.

When you see students on this campus…

what do you notice first?

Their religion?

Their caste?

Their language?

Or simply…

that they are students?

(Rudhika looked across the lawn.

Hundreds of students.

Walking together.

Laughing together.

Arguing together.

Learning together.)

She remained silent.

Because she had already begun discovering the answer.

And Professor Vinay knew it.

(The morning sun climbed a little higher.

Students continued moving across the campus.

Some wore white lab coats.

Some carried cricket bats.

Some spoke in Marathi.

Others in Hindi, English, Tamil, Bengali, Punjabi, and dozens of other languages.

To most people…

it was simply another college day.

To Professor Vinay…

it was a living psychology laboratory.)

(Vinay looked toward the students.)

**Professor Vinay**: Rudhika…

do you know why humans create groups?

(Rudhika thought.)

**Rudhika**: Because we like people who are similar to us?

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's part of it.

But let's go much further back.

Thousands of years.

Imagine you're living in a forest.

No cities.

No police.

No hospitals.

No supermarkets.

Only small groups of people trying to survive.

(Rudhika imagined the scene.)

**Professor Vinay**: If someone from your own group became ill…

would you help them?

**Rudhika**: Of course.

**Professor Vinay**: Why?

**Rudhika**: Because they're my people.

Vinay nodded.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Now imagine another group competing for the same water…

the same food…

the same land.

Your brain has to answer one question very quickly.

"Friend or danger?"

Sometimes…

answering incorrectly meant death.

(Rudhika slowly understood.)

**Professor Vinay**: The human brain became remarkably good at recognizing groups.

Not because groups are evil.

Because survival required cooperation.

Families.

Villages.

Tribes.

Communities.

Without them…

our ancestors probably wouldn't have survived.

(Rudhika looked across the campus.)

**Professor Vinay**: So the desire to belong isn't a flaw.

It's deeply human.

Everyone wants to feel…

"I have people."

No matter where they're born.

No matter what language they speak.

(Vinay picked up two small twigs from the ground.)

He placed them separately on the bench.

**Professor Vinay**: Imagine this twig is you.

And this twig is another person.

Individually…

both are easy to break.

(He snapped one twig effortlessly.)

Then he picked up several more fallen twigs.

He tied them loosely together using a blade of grass.

He tried to bend them.

They resisted.

**Professor Vinay**: Groups gave human beings strength.

Protection.

Identity.

Purpose.

None of that is wrong.

(Rudhika nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: But every strength carries a shadow.

(Rudhika looked up.)

**Professor Vinay**: The same mind that says,

“These are my people…”

can also begin saying,

“Those are not.”

And once someone becomes “not us”…

something dangerous can happen.

Empathy begins to shrink.

(Rudhika was listening intently.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

have you ever noticed that people sometimes say things about entire groups…

that they would never say to a person’s face?

(Rudhika thought for a moment.)

Then nodded.

**Rudhika**: Yes.

Someone might say…

“All people from that religion are like this.”

Or…

“Everyone from that country is selfish.”

But if they actually meet someone from that group…

they often behave differently.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Precisely.

Because labels are simple.

People are complicated.

The brain likes shortcuts.

Reality rarely cooperates.

(A few first-year students walked past them laughing loudly.

One accidentally dropped his notebook.

Without hesitation…

students from completely different departments stopped to help him gather the scattered pages.

Within seconds…

they continued walking in different directions.

None of them asked each other’s religion.

Or caste.

Or political opinions.

They simply saw…

someone who needed help.)

Vinay pointed toward them.

**Professor Vinay**: Did you notice what just happened?

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: They didn't help a Hindu.

Or a Muslim.

Or a Maharashtrian.

Or an engineering student.

They helped…

a person.

(Vinay's eyes brightened.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Before every label…

there is a human being.

The problem begins when we forget the order.

First comes the person.

Then comes every identity they carry.

Never reverse them.

(Rudhika wrote the sentence carefully.)

> "When identity comes before humanity…
>
> compassion becomes conditional."

(She looked at what she had written.)

Vinay nodded approvingly.

**Professor Vinay**: History has shown us something remarkable.

The greatest acts of kindness…

and the greatest acts of cruelty…

have both been committed by ordinary human beings.

Not monsters.

Not angels.

People.

(Rudhika frowned.)

**Rudhika**: Then…

if this tendency exists in everyone…

how do we prevent it?

(Vinay looked toward the ancient banyan tree.)

Its branches spread in every direction.

Birds of different colors rested on the same limbs.

Some stayed only for a moment.

Others built nests.

The tree rejected none of them.

A gentle smile appeared on his face.

**Professor Vinay**: More than two thousand years ago…

the sages of this land noticed the same tendency you're asking about.

They saw how easily human beings divided themselves into "us" and "them."

So they offered a different way of looking at the world.

Not as competing tribes…

but as one human family.

They expressed that vision in a simple Sanskrit phrase.

**“वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्” *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*.**

(Rudhika had heard the phrase before.

But today…

she felt she was about to understand it for the first time.)

She closed her notebook.

Not because the lesson was ending.

But because she wanted to listen…

without writing a single word.

(The garden had grown quieter.

Even the usual chatter from nearby classrooms seemed distant.

Professor Vinay gently picked up a fallen banyan leaf.

He held it between his fingers for a moment before speaking.)

**Professor Vinay**: Rudhika…

what do you think people mean when they hear the phrase…

“Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”?

Rudhika thought for a moment.

**Rudhika**: That…

the whole world is one family.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: That’s the translation.

But translations rarely carry the entire idea.

(Rudhika waited.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

is every family peaceful?

(Rudhika laughed softly.)

**Rudhika**: Definitely not.

**Professor Vinay**: Do brothers always agree?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Do parents never make mistakes?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Can family members hurt each other?

(The smile slowly disappeared from Rudhika's face.)

She answered quietly.

**Rudhika**: Yes.

Sometimes…

very deeply.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Then "the world is one family" cannot possibly mean…

"Everyone is always kind."

Because even families struggle.

(The banyan leaf slipped gently from his hand and landed on the ground.)

**Professor Vinay**: The sages weren't describing reality as it already existed.

They were describing a way of seeing.

An ideal to practice.

A reminder.

Before you are a Hindu…

a Muslim…

a Christian…

a Buddhist…

an atheist…

an Indian…

an American…

a scientist…

or a teacher…

you are first…

a human being.

And before that…

a living being capable of joy…

fear…

love…

and suffering.

(Rudhika listened carefully.)

**Professor Vinay**: Every newborn enters this world crying.

Not in Sanskrit.

Not in English.

Not in Arabic.

Not in Chinese.

Just…

crying.

Everyone laughs.

Everyone loses someone.

Everyone fears rejection.

Everyone searches for meaning.

The details differ.

The experience of being human…

is shared.

(Rudhika slowly closed her eyes.)

She remembered the pain she had carried for years.

Then she imagined…

perhaps countless others carried different pains…

just as invisible.

Vinay continued.

**Professor Vinay**: This idea doesn't ask us to erase differences.

Differences are beautiful.

Languages.

Music.

Food.

Traditions.

Ways of celebrating.

Ways of praying.

Ways of thinking.

Human civilization would be poorer without them.

The problem begins…

when identity stops becoming something we have…

and starts becoming the only thing we are.

(Rudhika wrote carefully.)

"Identity should describe us.

It should never imprison us."

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

When identity becomes the center of our entire self…

every disagreement feels like a personal attack.

That's why people become defensive so quickly.

They're not protecting an idea.

They're protecting the story they've built about themselves.

(Rudhika suddenly remembered their conversation from Chapter Two.)

She smiled.

**Rudhika**: You told me…

people often defend themselves…

not their beliefs.

Vinay smiled back.

**Professor Vinay**: I'm glad you remembered.

Psychology has a habit of connecting today's lesson with yesterday's.

(For a few moments they simply watched students crossing the campus.)

A young man wearing a cricket jersey greeted a girl wearing a laboratory coat.

Another student carrying a guitar opened the library door for an elderly professor.

Nearby…

someone offered water to a campus gardener working under the morning sun.

No one asked each other which community they belonged to before helping.

Humanity had quietly arrived before identity.

(Vinay pointed toward them.)

**Professor Vinay**: Notice something.

Goodness rarely announces its religion.

Kindness rarely introduces its caste.

Compassion doesn't need a passport.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: We often remember hatred because it shouts.

We forget kindness because it whispers.

Yet if you observe carefully…

most ordinary people spend their days helping far more than harming.

Parents caring for children.

Doctors treating strangers.

Teachers encouraging students.

Neighbors helping one another during floods.

Volunteers serving food after disasters.

These acts rarely become headlines.

But they quietly hold civilization together.

(Rudhika looked around the campus.)

Perhaps…

the world wasn't divided only by hatred.

Perhaps it was also connected…

by millions of unnoticed acts of kindness.

After a thoughtful silence…

she spoke.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

may I ask you something personal?

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: You may.

**Rudhika**: You studied in the United States.

You had opportunities there that many people dream about.

Better research.

Better salaries.

Cleaner air.

Cleaner rivers.

Stronger infrastructure.

Sometimes…

I wonder why anyone would come back.

Our country has pollution.

Corruption.

Paper leaks.

Communal tensions.

Political conflicts.

People argue endlessly.

Sometimes peaceful protesters are treated unfairly…

(She stopped herself.)

**Rudhika**: I don't mean to criticize my own country.

I just…

don't understand.

(Vinay looked at her calmly.)

A gentle smile appeared on his face.

**Professor Vinay**: Everything you've mentioned…

exists.

Pretending otherwise would help no one.

No nation becomes stronger by denying its weaknesses.

(Rudhika nodded.)

Vinay looked toward the ancient banyan tree whose roots had spread across the earth for generations.

**Professor Vinay**: But a country is more than its problems.

Just as a person is more than their illnesses.

(He paused.)

**Professor Vinay**: Let me tell you why I came home.

(Vinay rested both hands on the walking stick beside the bench.

He wasn't searching for the right answer.

He had lived it.)

**Professor Vinay**: When I first went to the United States…

I was twenty-four.

Curious.

Ambitious.

And convinced that I had all the important questions already.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: I was wrong.

(Both of them laughed softly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Those years taught me an extraordinary amount.

I learned from brilliant professors.

Worked in excellent laboratories.

Collaborated with people from different countries.

Some of the finest psychologists I've ever met…

I met there.

Science flourishes when curious people work together.

No matter where they were born.

(Rudhika nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: One of my professors once told me something I'll never forget.

He said,

*"Never fall in love with a theory.*

*Fall in love with discovering what's true."*

I still hear those words whenever I teach.

(Rudhika wrote the sentence immediately.)

**Professor Vinay**: During my Master's…

we spent years studying the brain.

Memory.

Attention.

Emotion.

Decision-making.

Neural pathways.

Behavior.

It was fascinating.

But every now and then…

I would find myself asking a different kind of question.

Questions that couldn't always be answered by looking through a microscope.

(Rudhika leaned forward.)

**Professor Vinay**: Questions like…

Why does success sometimes leave people empty?

Why do two people experience the same event…

yet suffer differently?

Can attention itself be trained?

Can compassion be cultivated?

Can the mind observe its own thoughts without becoming trapped by them?

(Rudhika recognized many of those questions.)

They sounded remarkably similar…

to the conversations they'd been having beneath this tree.

**Professor Vinay**: One evening…

my professor asked me,

"Vinay…

why are you so interested in consciousness?"

I smiled and replied,

“Because where I come from…

people have been asking that question for a very long time.”

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: That conversation stayed with me.

It reminded me that humanity’s knowledge is like a great library.

No single civilization wrote every book.

Some cultures gave the world extraordinary mathematics.

Others transformed medicine.

Others reshaped engineering.

Others preserved philosophy.

Others expanded science.

Others produced magnificent art.

Wisdom has many homes.

(Rudhika nodded slowly.)

**Professor Vinay**: India is one of those homes.

Not because everything here is perfect.

Far from it.

But because generation after generation…

people kept asking questions about the human mind.

Not only…

“What can the mind know?”

But…

“What is the nature of the one who knows?”

(Rudhika paused writing.)

She wanted to hear every word.

**Professor Vinay**: Think about it.

Long before psychology became a modern scientific discipline…

people here were observing attention…

habit…

desire…

anger…

attachment…

suffering…

self-control…

compassion…

through careful introspection and philosophical inquiry.

Some conclusions were insightful.

Some were mistaken.

Just like every long intellectual tradition.

The point wasn't that they had all the answers.

The point was…

they never stopped asking.

(Rudhika looked toward the roots of the banyan tree.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's why I returned.

Not because India needed another professor.

But because I wanted to continue that conversation.

To bring together careful scientific research…

and centuries of philosophical reflection.

Neither replaces the other.

Both ask different questions.

Sometimes…

they even illuminate each other.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: So…

you didn't choose between science and spirituality.

(Vinay's eyes brightened.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

People often imagine they're enemies.

I don't.

Science asks,

"What is happening?"

Philosophy often asks,

"What does it mean?"

Spiritual traditions frequently ask,

"How should we live?"

Those questions aren't identical.

But neither are they rivals.

Together…

they help us understand more than any one of them could alone.

(A cool breeze stirred the banyan leaves.)

For a while…

neither of them spoke.

Rudhika watched students crossing the courtyard.

Some were rushing to laboratories.

Others to the library.

Some toward the sports ground.

Each walking toward a different destination.

Yet all of them…

trying to build a meaningful life.

She closed her notebook for a moment.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

I think I understand why you came back.

But…

there's still something that frightens me.

(Vinay turned toward her.)

**Rudhika**: You said every community has good people…

and every community has bad people.

Then…

how do I know whom to trust?

How do I recognize a genuinely good person…

before it's too late?

After everything that happened in my childhood…

I'm afraid of judging people wrongly.

(Vinay looked at her thoughtfully.

Then smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: That…

may be one of the most practical questions you've ever asked.

And fortunately…

it's a question psychology can help us answer.

Not perfectly.

But wisely.

(He reached for the notebook lying beside him.)

Instead of opening it…

he placed it between them.

**Professor Vinay**: Let's begin with a mistake almost everyone makes.

They judge people by their labels.

What we must learn…

is how to judge them by their patterns.

(Vinay placed the notebook between them.

He drew two circles.

Above the first, he wrote,

**Labels.**

Above the second,

**Character.**

He turned the notebook toward Rudhika.)

**Professor Vinay**: Which one do you think people notice first?

(Rudhika looked at the page.)

**Rudhika**: Labels.

**Professor Vinay**: Such as?

**Rudhika**: Religion.

Caste.

Nationality.

Political views.

Profession.

Rich or poor.

Male or female.

Young or old.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

They're the easiest things to see.

They're also among the least useful when judging someone's character.

(Rudhika frowned.)

**Professor Vinay**: Let me ask you something.

Can a doctor lie?

**Rudhika**: Yes.

**Professor Vinay**: Can a priest be cruel?

**Rudhika**: Yes.

**Professor Vinay**: Can a scientist be dishonest?

**Rudhika**: Yes.

**Professor Vinay**: Can a criminal show kindness to someone?

(Rudhika paused.)

**Rudhika**: …Yes.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Good.

You've just discovered something important.

A person's role…

is not the same as their character.

(Rudhika wrote the sentence.)

**Professor Vinay**: Labels tell us *what* someone is.

Character tells us *how* they live.

Those are completely different questions.

(A squirrel ran down the trunk of the banyan tree, paused near a student eating lunch, picked up a fallen peanut, and darted away again.)

Both of them smiled.

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

how long does it take to know someone's religion?

**Rudhika**: A few minutes.

Sometimes even less.

**Professor Vinay**: And how long does it take to know whether they're honest?

(Rudhika thought.)

**Rudhika**: Much longer.

**Professor Vinay**: Why?

**Rudhika**: Because honesty has to be observed.

Not assumed.

(Vinay nodded approvingly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Character reveals itself…

through repeated choices.

Not impressive introductions.

(Rudhika underlined the sentence.)

Vinay closed the notebook.

**Professor Vinay**: Psychology teaches us to be careful of first impressions.

Not because they're always wrong.

But because they're incomplete.

One act of kindness…

doesn't prove someone is kind.

One moment of anger…

doesn't prove someone is cruel.

Look for patterns.

Patterns are much more reliable than moments.

(Rudhika remembered her cousin.)

For years…

she had remembered one terrible afternoon.

Then she stopped herself.

No.

It hadn't been only one afternoon.

There had been many.

Many lies.

Many insults.

Many moments of fear.

It had been…

a pattern.

(Vinay noticed the realization on her face.)

He didn't ask what she was thinking.

Instead, he continued.

**Professor Vinay**: Suppose you meet someone new.

Instead of asking,

"Do I like them?"

Ask yourself a few different questions.

(Rudhika opened her notebook again.)

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Not on the first day.

Not on the second.

But after observing them for some time.

Watch quietly.

People reveal themselves.

(Rudhika nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Ask yourself…

"When they make a mistake…

do they admit it…

or immediately blame someone else?"

"When someone disagrees with them…

do they become curious…

or insulting?"

"How do they treat people…

who cannot benefit them?”

“The waiter.

The cleaner.

The security guard.

The younger student.

The elderly stranger.”

(Rudhika paused writing.)

**Professor Vinay**: Anyone can be polite to someone powerful.

Character is often revealed by how we treat those with less power than ourselves.

(Rudhika slowly looked around the campus.)

She watched a final-year student patiently helping a first-year find a classroom.

A professor thanked the gardener for watering the plants.

Two students picked up litter someone else had dropped.

Small actions.

Almost invisible.

Yet somehow…

they seemed more meaningful than grand speeches.

Vinay continued.

**Professor Vinay**: Notice something else.

Good people are not perfect people.

(Rudhika looked up.)

**Professor Vinay**: They’ll become impatient.

They’ll make mistakes.

Sometimes they'll hurt others unintentionally.

The difference is…

they're willing to reflect.

They're willing to apologize.

They're willing to change.

People with strong character don't believe they're always right.

They're more interested in becoming better than appearing perfect.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: That sounds difficult.

(Vinay laughed softly.)

**Professor Vinay**: It is.

For all of us.

Including me.

(Rudhika looked surprised.)

**Professor Vinay**: I've apologized to students before.

I've changed my mind after reading new evidence.

I've realized years later that I misunderstood someone.

Being a teacher doesn't make me immune to being wrong.

If anything…

it reminds me to stay humble.

(Rudhika closed her notebook for a moment.)

**Rudhika**: Professor…

what about the opposite?

How do we recognize someone who may not be safe to trust?

(Vinay became thoughtful.)

He didn't answer immediately.

He looked at the old banyan tree once more.

**Professor Vinay**: That's an important question.

But we must answer it carefully.

Not to become suspicious of everyone…

but to become wiser about whom we allow close to our hearts.

(The wind rustled the leaves above them.

The conversation was about to become even more practical.)

(The breeze had become gentler.

A few leaves drifted silently onto the stone pathway.

Professor Vinay waited for several moments before answering.

He wanted Rudhika to understand…

not memorize.)

**Professor Vinay**: Before I answer…

promise me something.

**Rudhika**: What is it?

**Professor Vinay**: Never use what I'm about to teach you…

to place people into permanent boxes.

(Rudhika looked puzzled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Human beings are capable of changing.

Some become wiser.

Some become kinder.

Some become more bitter.

Character is not a photograph.

It’s a moving picture.

(Rudhika nodded slowly.)

**Professor Vinay**: So don’t ask,

“Is this person good or bad?”

Ask instead,

“What direction are they moving in?”

(The question lingered.)

**Professor Vinay**: Now…

let’s talk about trust.

(Vinay picked up a clear glass bottle filled with water from beside the bench.)

He placed it on the notebook.

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

would you drink water from this bottle?

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: Probably.

**Professor Vinay**: Why “probably”?

(Rudhika laughed.)

**Rudhika**: Because I don’t know where it came from.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

You don’t distrust the water.

You simply wait for enough information.

Trust works the same way.

Healthy trust grows through evidence.

Not hope alone.

(Rudhika wrote the sentence immediately.)

> “Trust should be built by evidence…
>
> not rushed by emotion.”

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Very good.

Now…

what kind of evidence should we look for?

(He held up one finger.)

**Professor Vinay**: First…

consistency.

Does this person’s behavior stay reasonably similar…

whether they’re happy…

stressed…

successful…

or disappointed?

Everyone has bad days.

But wildly different personalities depending on convenience…

deserve careful observation.

(He raised a second finger.)

**Professor Vinay**: Second…

accountability.

When something goes wrong…

do they always find someone else to blame?

Or can they say,

“I was wrong.”

“I made a mistake.”

“I hurt you.”

Three very simple sentences.

Yet surprisingly difficult for many adults.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Third…

respect.

Not respect for powerful people.

Almost everyone manages that.

Watch how they treat people who cannot reward them.

The janitor.

The bus conductor.

The receptionist.

The street vendor.

The waiter.

People often reveal their values…

where they believe no one important is watching.

(Rudhika remembered the gardener from earlier.)

She smiled quietly.

(Vinay raised a fourth finger.)

**Professor Vinay**: Fourth…

boundaries.

If you politely say,

“No.”

What happens?

Do they accept it?

Do they ask respectfully?

Or do they guilt you…

mock you…

pressure you…

or become angry?

(Rudhika stopped writing.)

That question felt strangely personal.

Vinay noticed.

He continued gently.

**Professor Vinay**: Healthy people may feel disappointed by your boundary.

Unhealthy people often feel entitled to remove it.

(Rudhika slowly nodded.)

(Vinay raised a fifth finger.)

**Professor Vinay**: Finally…

watch what happens when someone else succeeds.

Do they celebrate?

Or do they immediately become jealous…

dismissive…

or determined to pull the other person down?

A generous heart usually finds joy in another person's growth.

Even our Goswami Tulsidas said that the person who find happiness in other's happiness and feel sad in other's sadness is a saint.

पर दुःख दुःख सुख सुख देखे पर। **(Manas 7 | 38 | 1)**

*A true saint feels sorrow when others are in sorrow and feels joy when others are happy.*

An insecure one often experiences another's success…

as its own failure.

(The notebook page was nearly full.)

Rudhika looked at it.

Then looked back at Professor Vinay.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

none of these questions ask about religion.

Or caste.

Or nationality.

Or political beliefs.

(Vinay smiled warmly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Because character isn't inherited through labels.

It's revealed through choices.

(Rudhika closed her notebook.)

She sat quietly for a moment.

Then…

a memory returned.

**Rudhika**: My cousin…

used to behave very politely whenever guests visited.

Everyone praised him.

They thought he was such a respectful child.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Masks are easiest to wear…

for short periods.

That's another reason we observe patterns over time.

Many people can perform kindness.

Living it every day…

is much harder.

(Rudhika let out a slow breath.)

For years…

she had believed she had failed to recognize danger.

Now she realized something different.

She hadn't lacked intelligence.

She had lacked time…

experience…

and adults willing to believe her.

(Vinay watched her expression soften.)

He didn't say anything.

Some realizations become stronger…

when no one interrupts them.

After a long silence…

(Rudhika smiled.)

Not a smile of certainty.

But of understanding.

The kind that grows quietly…

one conversation at a time.

(The morning had slowly turned into noon.

The shade of the banyan tree had shifted just enough that both of them instinctively moved a little further along the bench.

Neither of them noticed.

The conversation had become far more important than comfort.)

(Rudhika looked once more at the five points she had written.)

Consistency.

Accountability.

Respect.

Boundaries.

Joy in another's success.

She smiled.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

if everyone learned these things…

there would probably be much less suffering.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Perhaps.

But remember…

knowledge and practice are two different things.

Almost everyone knows lying is wrong.

Far fewer people tell the truth when it becomes expensive.

Almost everyone admires kindness.

Far fewer remain kind when they're angry.

Wisdom isn't measured by what we know.

It's measured by what we repeatedly choose.

(Rudhika slowly nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's another reason I ask students to observe people instead of judging them quickly.

Knowledge can be memorized.

Character has to be lived.

(A group of first-year students walked past them laughing.

One accidentally bumped into another student, causing a stack of books to fall.)

"I'm so sorry!"

The student immediately bent down and began picking them up.

His friend joined him without being asked.

The other student smiled.

"No problem."

Within seconds…

the conversation continued as though nothing had happened.

Vinay pointed toward them.

**Professor Vinay**: Another lesson.

(Rudhika watched.)

**Professor Vinay**: Did you notice what happened?

**Rudhika**: He apologized immediately.

**Professor Vinay**: And?

**Rudhika**: His friend helped without anyone asking.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Character often reveals itself in ordinary moments.

Not dramatic ones.

Most people imagine they'll discover someone's nature during a great crisis.

Sometimes they do.

But much more often…

it's revealed in everyday habits.

How they speak.

How they listen.

How they respond when inconvenienced.

How they treat people who can do nothing for them.

The extraordinary is usually built upon the ordinary.

(Rudhika quietly absorbed the thought.)

After a long pause…

she asked another question.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

may I ask something that has always confused me?

**Professor Vinay**: Of course.

**Rudhika**: If people become who they are because of childhood…

their surroundings…

their experiences…

then should we hate people who become cruel?

Or should we pity them?

(Vinay became thoughtful.)

He looked toward the old banyan tree.

Its trunk carried scars from storms that had passed years ago.

Yet it continued giving shade.

**Professor Vinay**: That's a question psychology alone cannot answer.

It belongs equally to ethics.

Law.

And philosophy.

(Rudhika waited.)

**Professor Vinay**: Understanding someone is not the same as agreeing with them.

Nor does understanding remove responsibility.

If a doctor explains how a disease spreads…

the doctor isn't defending the disease.

He's trying to stop it.

Psychology works the same way.

We study cruelty…

not because we admire it…

but because we wish to reduce it.

(Rudhika nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Your cousin's behavior may have been influenced by many things.

Your grandparents' behavior may also have been shaped by experiences we know nothing about.

Understanding those influences might help explain *why* they acted as they did.

But it would never make what they did…

right.

Explanation is not the same as justification.

(Rudhika underlined that sentence immediately.)

> “To explain is not to excuse.”

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Beautifully written.

Never forget it.

(A gentle silence followed.)

The campus clock struck twelve.

Students poured out of nearby classrooms.

The quiet garden slowly filled with distant conversations.

Rudhika watched them.

Hundreds of different faces.

Hundreds of different stories.

Some joyful.

Some painful.

Most invisible.

She smiled thoughtfully.

**Rudhika**: I think…

that’s what psychology really is.

Not learning how to judge people.

Learning how to understand them.

(Vinay's eyes reflected quiet satisfaction.)

**Professor Vinay**: Yes.

And understanding someone…

doesn't always mean inviting them into your life.

(Rudhika looked surprised.)

Vinay continued.

**Professor Vinay**: Compassion and boundaries can exist together.

You may understand why someone behaves the way they do…

and still decide they are not safe to keep close.

Those are not contradictions.

They are wisdom.

(Rudhika slowly closed her notebook.)

She had begun this week searching for answers.

She was beginning to realize…

the greatest gift Professor Vinay was giving her wasn't answers.

It was better questions.

(The afternoon breeze carried the fragrance of jasmine through the garden.)

For a while…

teacher and student simply sat beneath the ancient banyan tree.

Watching people.

Watching life.

Watching psychology unfold…

one ordinary moment at a time.

(The afternoon sun had begun its slow journey westward.

The shadows beneath the banyan tree stretched farther across the garden path.

Students came and went.

Some stopped to greet Professor Vinay.

Others simply smiled as they walked past.

For the first time…

Rudhika wasn't watching them with suspicion.

She was observing them.

Noticing.

Learning.

She realized there was a difference.)

(Vinay quietly closed his notebook.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me something.

(Rudhika looked up.)

**Professor Vinay**: How do you feel now…

compared to when we began this conversation?

(Rudhika didn't answer immediately.)

She searched for the right words.

Then…

she smiled.

**Rudhika**: I don't think people seem less complicated.

I think…

they seem more understandable.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's one of the most beautiful things psychology can do.

It doesn't make human beings simpler.

It makes them less mysterious.

(Rudhika looked around the campus.)

A group of friends laughed loudly outside the library.

Another student sat alone beneath a tree reading a novel.

A professor patiently explained something to a struggling student.

A groundskeeper carefully watered a row of young saplings.

Hundreds of lives.

Hundreds of stories.

Some joyful.

Some painful.

Most completely unknown to everyone else.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

I think I judged people too quickly.

Sometimes I feared them before knowing them.

Other times…

I trusted them before understanding them.

(Vinay smiled warmly.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's a mistake almost every human being makes.

We are all learning.

The goal isn't to become perfect judges of people.

The goal is to become careful observers.

Observe patiently.

Judge slowly.

Treat everyone with basic respect.

Offer trust gradually.

Protect your boundaries.

And remain willing to revise your opinion when new evidence appears.

(Rudhika wrote one final note on the page.)

> “Observe patiently.
>
> Judge slowly.
>
> Respect everyone.
>
> Trust gradually.
>
> Protect your boundaries.
>
> Remain open to learning.”

She looked at the words for a long moment.

Then quietly closed the notebook.

Not because there was nothing left to learn…

but because today’s lesson had found its place.

(A gentle silence settled between them.)

Neither of them felt the need to speak.

Sometimes…

the deepest conversations deserve a few moments of silence afterward.

The college bell echoed across the campus.

Students began making their way toward the canteen.

Professor Vinay stood, stretching his shoulders with a soft smile.

**Professor Vinay**: We've spoken enough about people for one morning.

(Rudhika laughed.)

**Rudhika**: I was just beginning to enjoy it.

(Vinay chuckled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Good.

Because the next conversation may be even more challenging.

(Rudhika tilted her head.)

Vinay picked up his bag.

**Professor Vinay**: Next time we will discuss about what causes mental illnesses to people

And how to help them too

(Rudhika's curiosity returned instantly.)

She stood up.

**Rudhika**: I'm ready.

(Vinay looked toward the tricolor fluttering gently above the administration building.)

He smiled not with pride alone, nor with disappointment, but with the quiet affection one reserves for something deeply familiar.

**Professor Vinay**: Come.

Let's walk.

Some answers…

are better given while moving forward.

(Together, they left the shade of the banyan tree and began walking slowly along the stone pathway that wound through the heart of the campus.

The next conversation had already begun.)

**End of Chapter 5**

# The Mirror and the Mind

(The afternoon sun bathed the college campus in a warm golden light.

Professor Vinay and Rudhika walked slowly along a stone pathway lined with flowering trees.

Neither hurried.

Some conversations deserved the pace of walking.)

(Rudhika looked unusually thoughtful.

She had spent the previous evening rereading every page of her notebook.

Questions had been answered.

Yet…

new questions had quietly taken their place.)

Vinay noticed.

**Professor Vinay**: Your notebook seems heavier today.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: It has the same number of pages.

Just…

more questions.

(Vinay laughed.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's usually a good sign.

(Rudhika looked ahead.)

For several moments…

she simply watched students sitting beneath trees.

Some were laughing loudly.

Others were studying.

One student sat alone wearing headphones, staring into the distance.

Another paced while talking anxiously on the phone.

One young man leaned against a wall, shoulders slumped, as though carrying something invisible.

Rudhika slowed her pace.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

may I ask something?

**Professor Vinay**: Always.

**Rudhika**: Over the last few weeks…

I've noticed something.

Almost everyone seems to be carrying something invisible.

Some are stressed.

Some are anxious.

Some feel lonely even when surrounded by people.

Some carry painful memories for years.

Some lose hope completely.

(She hesitated.)

**Rudhika**: Why?

Why does the human mind become like this?

If the mind is capable of love…

creativity…

and wisdom…

why is it also capable of trauma…

fear…

anxiety…

and loneliness?

(Vinay didn't answer immediately.)

Instead…

he bent down and picked up a small stone from the pathway.

He handed it to Rudhika.

**Professor Vinay**: Hold this.

(She did.)

**Professor Vinay**: Is it heavy?

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: Not at all.

**Professor Vinay**: Hold it for one minute.

Still easy.

Hold it for an hour.

Your hand begins to ache.

Hold it for an entire day…

and eventually your whole arm feels exhausted.

Did the stone become heavier?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Then what changed?

(Rudhika thought.)

**Rudhika**: I kept carrying it.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Many emotional burdens behave similarly.

The event may last minutes.

The mind may carry it for years.

(Rudhika looked quietly at the stone.)

She thought of the memory she'd carried since she was fourteen.

Vinay continued.

**Professor Vinay**: But before we go any further…

I want to correct one very common misunderstanding.

Many people speak about trauma…

stress…

anxiety…

or loneliness…

as though they are signs that someone is weak.

They are not.

Nor are they proof that someone is broken.

They are experiences of the human mind.

Real experiences.

Sometimes deeply painful ones.

Ignoring them doesn't make them disappear.

Understanding them gives us a better chance of responding wisely.

(Rudhika nodded slowly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

have you ever touched a hot stove?

(Rudhika laughed.)

**Rudhika**: Once.

Only once.

**Professor Vinay**: Why only once?

**Rudhika**: Because it hurt.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Pain has a purpose.

Physical pain tells us,

“Something is harming your body.”

Emotional pain often tells us,

“Something important in your inner life needs attention.”

The mistake isn’t that pain exists.

The mistake is believing pain is your identity.

(Rudhika stopped walking.)

That sentence lingered.

(Vinay smiled gently.)

**Professor Vinay**: You are not your anxiety.

You are not your loneliness.

You are not your trauma.

Those are experiences you have.

They are not the entirety of who you are.

(Rudhika whispered the sentence to herself.)

Almost as if she wanted to remember it forever.

A cool breeze passed through the trees.

The leaves rustled softly overhead.

Vinay looked toward the path ahead.

**Professor Vinay**: Different traditions have tried to understand this in different ways.

Modern psychology asks,

“How does the mind develop these patterns?”

Alfred Adler asked,

“What meaning has this person given to their life experiences?”

Indian philosophers often asked,

“Who is the one experiencing these thoughts in the first place?”

Different questions.

Different methods.

Yet all searching…

for a deeper understanding of the human condition.

(Rudhika’s curiosity lit up.)

She smiled.

**Rudhika**: Then…

can we learn from all of them?

(Vinay smiled warmly.)

**Professor Vinay**: That’s exactly what I hoped you would ask.

They continued walking beneath the trees.

The conversation had reached a place where psychology…

philosophy…

and lived experience…

were about to meet.

(The stone pathway curved gently around a small pond.

The water was still.

A few lotus leaves floated quietly on the surface.

Professor Vinay slowed his pace.

He looked at the reflection of the trees in the water.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me something, Rudhika.

When you look into this pond…

what do you see?

(Rudhika looked down.)

**Rudhika**: My reflection.

**Professor Vinay**: Is that you?

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: It's an image of me.

Not me.

Vinay nodded.

**Professor Vinay**: Good.

Now imagine someone throws a stone into the pond.

(The surface rippled.)

Her reflection broke into countless distorted fragments.

**Professor Vinay**: Has your face changed?

**Rudhika**: No.

Only the reflection.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Remember this image.

We'll come back to it.

(They continued walking.)

**Professor Vinay**: More than a hundred years ago…

an Austrian psychiatrist named Alfred Adler became interested in a question that many people weren't asking.

He noticed that two children could experience similar hardships…

yet become very different adults.

One became compassionate.

Another became cruel.

One lost hope.

Another developed extraordinary courage.

He wondered…

"If the event is similar…

why are the outcomes so different?"

(Rudhika listened carefully.)

**Professor Vinay**: So Adler suggested something remarkable.

He believed that events influence us…

but they do not completely determine us.

Between an event…

and the life we eventually build…

stands something powerful.

Our interpretation.

(Rudhika frowned slightly.)

**Rudhika**: Interpretation?

**Professor Vinay**: Yes.

Suppose two students fail the same examination.

One says,

“I failed.

I need to study differently.”

The other says,

“I failed.

I’m a failure.”

Same event.

Different meaning.

Different future.

(Rudhika became thoughtful.)

**Professor Vinay**: Your experiences matter.

Very much.

But the meaning you gradually give those experiences…

also matters.

(Rudhika was silent.)

After a while…

she spoke softly.

**Rudhika**: After what happened with my grandparents…

I think I slowly began believing…

that maybe something was wrong with me.

(Vinay looked at her with quiet kindness.)

**Professor Vinay**: Did your grandparents ever tell you that directly?

(Rudhika thought.)

**Rudhika**: Not in those exact words.

**Professor Vinay**: Yet…

you reached that conclusion.

(Rudhika nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's exactly the kind of question Adler wanted people to notice.

Not because he blamed them.

But because he believed…

once we become aware of the story we're telling ourselves…

we can begin to rewrite it.

(Rudhika looked down.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me honestly.

When someone compliments you…

what is your first thought?

(She answered almost immediately.)

**Rudhika**: They don't really know me.

Or…

they're just being polite.

**Professor Vinay**: And if someone criticizes you?

(Rudhika smiled sadly.)

**Rudhika**: I believe them much faster.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Do you see?

The compliment and the criticism arrive from outside.

But something inside you decides which one feels believable.

That inner filter…

wasn't born with you.

It was built.

And what has been built…

can also be rebuilt.

(Rudhika's eyes widened slightly.)

**Rudhika**: Then trauma isn't only the painful event?

**Professor Vinay**: That's right.

Trauma is complex.

The event itself matters.

Its intensity matters.

Its duration matters.

Whether someone supported you afterward matters.

Your age matters.

Your biology matters.

And the meaning your mind gradually attaches to the experience also matters.

There isn't one single cause.

There rarely is in psychology.

(Rudhika slowly repeated the sentence.)

“There isn’t one single cause.”

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Human beings are wonderfully complicated.

That’s why psychologists should be cautious whenever someone says,

“I’ve found the one reason.”

Real life is usually more layered than that.

(They reached a wooden bench overlooking the pond.)

Both sat down.

For a few moments…

they watched dragonflies skim across the water.

Then Rudhika asked quietly,

**Rudhika**: Professor…

if our interpretation matters so much…

does that mean people should simply think positively?

(Vinay laughed softly.)

**Professor Vinay**: No.

That is one of the most common misunderstandings.

Positive thinking alone cannot heal a wounded mind.

Imagine someone breaks their leg.

Would you tell them,

“Just think positively.”

(Rudhika laughed.)

**Rudhika**: Of course not.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Sometimes people need time.

Sometimes they need supportive family.

Sometimes trusted friends.

Sometimes therapy.

Sometimes medication prescribed by a qualified professional.

Sometimes changes in their environment.

Sometimes all of these together.

Psychology isn't about pretending pain doesn't exist.

It's about helping people carry it…

understand it…

and gradually reduce its hold over their lives.

(Rudhika nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Adler believed something else that I find deeply hopeful.

He believed human beings are not merely products of their past.

They are also creators of their future.

The past explains much.

But it does not have absolute authority over tomorrow.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: That sounds…

freeing.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: It is.

But now…

let me show you something fascinating.

Long before Adler…

Indian philosophers were asking a different question.

Not,

“What story does the mind tell?”

But,

“Who is the one listening to that story?”

(Rudhika’s curiosity immediately returned.)

She leaned forward.

**Rudhika**: Is this where Śaṅkarācārya comes in?

(Vinay looked toward the calm surface of the pond.

The ripples had faded.

The reflection had become clear again.)

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Yes.

And we’ll begin…

with the pond.

(The pond had become perfectly still once again.

The trees stood upright within its reflection.

Clouds drifted silently across the mirrored sky.

Professor Vinay picked up another small pebble.)

Without saying a word…

he dropped it into the water.

Ripples spread outward in widening circles.

The reflection broke apart once more.

**Professor Vinay**: Look carefully.

Did the pond stop being water?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Did the trees disappear?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Then what changed?

Rudhika watched the ripples.

**Rudhika**: The reflection became disturbed.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Good.

Now let me tell you about a remarkable philosopher.

More than twelve hundred years ago…

Ādi Śaṅkarācārya travelled across India asking a question that sounds simple…

but changes everything.

“Who are you?”

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: That’s a difficult question.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Most people answer with labels.

“I’m a student.”

“I’m a teacher.”

“I’m Indian.”

“I’m a woman.”

“I’m rich.”

“I’m poor.”

“But if all those labels disappeared…

would *you* disappear?”

(Rudhika became quiet.)

She had never thought about it that way.

**Professor Vinay**: Śaṅkarācārya argued that we usually mistake the changing parts of ourselves…

for our deepest identity.

The body changes.

Thoughts change.

Emotions change.

Memories change.

Beliefs change.

Even personality changes over time.

Yet…

there remains an awareness that notices all these changes.

He invited people to investigate that awareness.

Not merely believe in it.

Investigate it.

(Rudhika looked back at the pond.)

**Professor Vinay**: Think about yesterday.

You had different thoughts.

Different emotions.

Different conversations.

Yet…

something within you knew,

“I experienced yesterday.”

That knowing itself…

was Śaṅkarācārya’s starting point.

(Rudhika frowned.)

**Rudhika**: Then…

would he say trauma is an illusion?

(Vinay immediately shook his head.)

**Professor Vinay**: No.

At least not in the way many people misunderstand him.

Pain is experienced.

Fear is experienced.

Grief is experienced.

If someone loses a loved one…

their suffering is real.

If someone survives abuse…

their suffering is real.

No compassionate teacher should dismiss that.

(Rudhika looked relieved.)

Vinay continued.

**Professor Vinay**: What Śaṅkarācārya questioned…

was whether suffering defines the deepest truth about who you are.

Suppose dark clouds cover the sky.

Has the sun ceased to exist?

**Rudhika**: No.

It's hidden.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Advaita often uses similar reasoning.

The mind may become clouded by fear…

anger…

attachment…

or confusion.

Those experiences deserve understanding and care.

But they are not the entirety of the Self.

(Rudhika slowly nodded.)

She looked again at the pond.

The ripples had almost disappeared.

The reflection had quietly returned.

**Professor Vinay**: Remember the pond.

The water reflected the sky before the pebble.

It reflected the sky during the ripples.

And it reflects the sky after the ripples.

The reflections changed.

The water remained.

Śaṅkarācārya invites us to ask…

“What in me is like the water…

rather than the reflection?”

(A long silence followed.)

Rudhika whispered,

**Rudhika**: That sounds peaceful.

(Vinay smiled gently.)

**Professor Vinay**: It can be.

But it can also be misunderstood.

Some people hear these teachings and conclude,

“My suffering isn’t real.”

That isn’t what compassionate teachers mean.

If someone is drowning…

you don’t lecture them about the nature of water.

You help them reach the shore.

Only then…

can deeper philosophical questions become meaningful.

(Rudhika laughed softly.)

**Rudhika**: That’s probably why people say philosophy is impractical.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Sometimes philosophy becomes impractical…

when it forgets the person standing in front of it.

Good philosophy should make us more compassionate…

not less.

(A gentle breeze crossed the pond.)

Several lotus leaves trembled.

Then Rudhika asked another question.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

if Śaṅkarācārya says our deepest identity isn't our changing thoughts…

then why didn't every philosopher agree with him?

(Vinay's eyes brightened.)

He seemed pleased by the question.

**Professor Vinay**: Because great philosophers are rarely interested in repeating one another.

They are interested in pursuing truth as they understand it.

Agreement is valuable.

Honest disagreement can also be valuable.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: After Śaṅkarācārya…

another extraordinary thinker appeared.

Śrī Rāmānujācārya.

He listened to many of the same scriptures.

Asked many of the same questions.

Yet reached some different conclusions.

Not because he disliked Śaṅkarācārya.

But because he believed reality revealed something even richer.

(Rudhika leaned forward.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tomorrow…

we'll let Rāmānujācārya join this conversation.

And after him…

Madhvācārya.

Three brilliant minds.

Reading many of the same texts.

Yet seeing different dimensions of reality.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: Almost like three psychologists observing the same person…

and noticing different things.

(Vinay laughed.)

**Professor Vinay**: That…

is an excellent analogy.

And perhaps…

the best place to begin understanding philosophy.

(The sun slowly descended toward the horizon.

The pond reflected the evening sky…

quiet…

clear…

and infinitely deep.)

(The next afternoon…

the same pond welcomed them again.

The lotus flowers had opened a little wider.

A gardener nearby carefully watered young saplings.

Neither Professor Vinay nor Rudhika spoke immediately.

Sometimes…

continuing a conversation required first returning to its silence.)

(Rudhika looked toward the still water.)

**Rudhika**: Yesterday you said Śaṅkarācārya asked,

“Who is the one experiencing these thoughts?”

Then you said Rāmānujācārya disagreed with some of his conclusions.

What did he see differently?

(Vinay smiled.)

Instead of answering…

he pointed toward the gardener.

The elderly man was carefully tying a young plant to a wooden support.

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

why is he doing that?

(Rudhika watched for a moment.)

**Rudhika**: So the plant grows straight.

If it bends too much now…

it may never grow properly.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Do you think the gardener hates the plant because it needs support?

(Rudhika laughed.)

**Rudhika**: Of course not.

He’s helping it.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Beautiful.

Now imagine someone walking past and saying,

“The plant should become strong on its own.”

Would that be wisdom?

(Rudhika shook her head.)

**Rudhika**: No.

Every living thing needs support while growing.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: That simple observation captures something Rāmānujācārya emphasized.

He agreed that human beings should seek truth.

He agreed that the mind can become attached, fearful, and confused.

But he believed something more.

He believed we are not isolated beings trying to rescue ourselves alone.

Relationship is woven into who we are.

(Rudhika listened carefully.)

**Professor Vinay**: Think about your own life.

When your grandparents beat you…

who protected you?

(Rudhika answered immediately.)

**Rudhika**: My sister.

**Professor Vinay**: Could you have protected yourself?

(Her eyes lowered.)

**Rudhika**: No.

I was fourteen.

(Vinay nodded gently.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Sometimes healing begins…

not because the mind suddenly changes…

but because another person enters our suffering.

(Rudhika became quiet.)

**Professor Vinay**: Rāmānujācārya often described reality as deeply relational.

Our existence isn't separate from everything else.

We depend on one another.

We grow through love…

service…

gratitude…

and ultimately through our relationship with God.

Whether one personally accepts that theological view or not…

there is a psychological insight here that modern research also supports.

Human beings heal better…

when they experience safe relationships.

(Rudhika looked thoughtful.)

**Rudhika**: So loneliness isn't simply…

being physically alone?

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Excellent question.

No.

Many people are alone…

without feeling lonely.

Many are surrounded by crowds…

yet feel profoundly lonely.

Loneliness is less about the number of people around you…

and more about whether you feel genuinely seen…

understood…

accepted…

and connected.

(Rudhika remembered crowded classrooms where she had felt invisible.)

Vinay continued.

**Professor Vinay**: Imagine two houses.

One has dozens of lights on outside…

but no one lives inside.

The other has a single lamp…

and a family waiting at the table.

Which feels more like home?

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: The second one.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Connection is not measured by quantity.

It's measured by quality.

(A gentle breeze carried the fragrance of jasmine.)

For several moments…

they simply walked.

Then Rudhika asked,

**Rudhika**: Professor…

can trauma make someone lonely…

even when people care about them?

(Vinay nodded immediately.)

**Professor Vinay**: Very often.

Sometimes trauma teaches the mind,

“No one will understand.”

Or…

“If I trust people…

I’ll be hurt again.”

So the person withdraws.

Not because they dislike people…

but because distance feels safer than disappointment.

(Rudhika looked away.)

She knew that feeling.

Vinay noticed.

He continued softly.

**Professor Vinay**: Remember what we discussed in the previous chapter?

Survival strategies.

Many of them are useful…

during danger.

The difficulty comes when they continue…

long after the danger has passed.

A child who learns not to trust anyone…

may survive an unsafe home.

But the same strategy…

can make healthy friendships difficult years later.

The strategy isn't foolish.

It's outdated.

(Rudhika repeated quietly.)

"The strategy isn't foolish.

It's outdated."

She wrote it carefully in her notebook.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Psychology doesn't ask,

"What's wrong with you?"

It often asks,

"What happened to you…

and what adaptations helped you survive?"

(Rudhika looked up.)

**Rudhika**: Then…

how do people begin healing?

Can someone really change?

(Vinay looked toward the gardener again.)

The old man had finished tying the young plant.

Now…

he was watering the soil around its roots.

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

could he force the plant to grow?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: What can he do?

(Rudhika thought.)

**Rudhika**: Give it water.

Sunlight.

Good soil.

Protect it.

Then…

the plant grows by itself.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Beautiful.

Healing is surprisingly similar.

We cannot command ourselves…

“Stop being anxious.”

“Stop remembering.”

“Stop hurting.”

But we can gradually create the conditions…

in which healing becomes more likely.

(Rudhika waited.)

Vinay counted on his fingers.

**Professor Vinay**: Safe relationships.

Healthy routines.

Adequate sleep.

Physical movement.

Meaningful work.

Learning emotional skills.

Professional therapy when needed.

Medical treatment when appropriate.

Patience.

And compassion toward oneself.

None of these guarantee healing.

But together…

they create fertile soil.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: Just like the gardener.

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Healing is often less like repairing a machine…

and more like growing a tree.

It cannot be rushed.

But it can be nurtured.

(The afternoon light grew softer.)

Rudhika closed her notebook for a moment.

**Rudhika**: Yesterday…

Śaṅkarācārya helped me see that I am more than my thoughts.

Today…

Rāmānujācārya reminds me…

that I don’t have to heal alone.

(Vinay's eyes reflected quiet appreciation.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's a thoughtful summary.

(Rudhika looked ahead.)

**Rudhika**: Then…

what did Madhvācārya teach?

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Ah…

Madhvācārya asks us another important question.

If suffering is real…

and relationships are real…

what responsibilities do we have…

while living in this very real world?

(The evening breeze stirred the branches overhead.

The conversation was ready to enter its third chapter.)

(The sun had begun to descend.

Long shadows stretched across the walking trail.

A few students hurried toward the hostel.

Others sat beneath the trees discussing assignments.

Life continued quietly around them.

Professor Vinay and Rudhika resumed walking.)

**Rudhika**: Yesterday…

you said Śaṅkarācārya asked,

"Who am I?"

Today…

Rāmānujācārya reminded me that we don't heal alone.

What question did Madhvācārya ask?

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Imagine three travelers standing before the Himalayas.

The first says,

"The mountain reminds me that appearances can sometimes hide deeper truths."

The second says,

"The mountain reminds me that everything in nature is beautifully connected."

The third says,

"The mountain is a real mountain.

If we ignore that reality…

we may fall from its cliffs."

(Rudhika laughed.)

**Professor Vinay**: All three are looking at the same mountain.

Yet each notices something different.

(Moments of silence passed.)

Vinay continued.

**Professor Vinay**: Madhvācārya emphasized something very important.

The world is real.

Other people are real.

Joy is real.

Pain is real.

Goodness is real.

Cruelty is real.

And because these are real…

our choices matter.

(Rudhika nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: If a child is hungry…

you don't tell them,

"Hunger is only in your mind."

You feed them.

If someone is drowning in grief…

you don't tell them,

"Detach yourself."

You sit beside them.

You listen.

You help.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: That sounds…

very practical.

**Professor Vinay**: It is.

Madhvācārya believed that spiritual life should never become an excuse for ignoring suffering.

Reality calls for responsibility.

(Rudhika thought quietly.)

**Rudhika**: So…

all three philosophers agree that people should become better.

They just explain it differently.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

That is something people often forget.

Philosophical disagreements do not always mean opposing goals.

Sometimes they simply propose different paths toward wisdom.

(They stopped near an old stone bench.)

Vinay sat down.

Rudhika remained standing for a moment before asking another question.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

may I try summarizing them?

**Professor Vinay**: Please do.

(Rudhika took a deep breath.)

**Rudhika**: Śaṅkarācārya reminds us…

that our deepest identity is greater than our changing thoughts and emotions.

Rāmānujācārya reminds us…

that love…

relationships…

and devotion are essential parts of life.

Madhvācārya reminds us…

that this world is real…

our actions are real…

and helping others is our responsibility.

(Vinay looked genuinely pleased.)

**Professor Vinay**: Very well said.

Only remember one thing.

No summary can fully capture a great philosopher.

Entire lifetimes have been spent studying each of them.

Today…

we've merely opened the first page.

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: Then I have a lot of reading to do.

(Vinay laughed.)

**Professor Vinay**: More than you currently imagine.

(Both laughed softly.)

After a while…

Rudhika became serious again.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

all of this sounds beautiful.

But when someone is overwhelmed by anxiety…

or trapped in depression…

or haunted by trauma…

they're usually not thinking about philosophy.

They're just trying to survive another day.

(Vinay became quiet.)

He appreciated the question.

**Professor Vinay**: You're absolutely right.

And that's where many people misunderstand philosophy.

True philosophy isn't meant to replace psychological care.

Nor is psychology meant to replace philosophy.

They answer different questions.

(Rudhika listened carefully.)

**Professor Vinay**: Suppose someone breaks their arm.

Would reading a book about anatomy heal the fracture?

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: They need a doctor.

A cast.

Time.

Rehabilitation.

Now imagine someone asks,

"What have I learned about life from this experience?"

That question belongs somewhere else.

Not to medicine…

but to philosophy.

One helps the bone heal.

The other helps the person make sense of suffering.

Neither replaces the other.

(Rudhika slowly nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Likewise…

someone experiencing severe anxiety…

major depression…

post-traumatic stress…

or another mental health condition…

may benefit from therapy.

Sometimes from medication prescribed by a qualified psychiatrist.

Sometimes from both.

That isn't weakness.

It's healthcare.

Just as wearing glasses isn't weakness.

Neither is seeking help for the mind.

(Rudhika looked relieved.)

She had wondered about that for a long time.

Vinay continued.

**Professor Vinay**: Philosophy may help us ask,

"How should I live?"

Psychology may help us understand,

"Why do I think and feel this way?"

Medicine may help address biological factors contributing to suffering.

Family and friends may provide support and belonging.

Healing often involves many hands.

Not one.

(A gentle breeze rustled the leaves.)

Rudhika looked toward the pond.

Its surface reflected the orange sky.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

if all these traditions value helping people…

why do so many arguments happen over whose philosophy is correct?

(Vinay smiled knowingly.)

Vinay picked up three fallen leaves.

He placed them beside each other.

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me.

Which of these leaves is the most beautiful?

(Rudhika examined them.)

One was broad.

One was long and narrow.

One had tiny holes made by insects.

She smiled.

**Rudhika**: That's impossible to answer.

They're different.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Unfortunately…

human beings sometimes become so attached to defending their leaf…

that they forget to admire the tree.

(Rudhika laughed.)

**Professor Vinay**: The purpose of philosophy isn't to win debates.

It's to become wiser…

more compassionate…

more truthful…

and more humble.

If studying philosophy makes someone arrogant…

they've probably missed something important.

(The campus bell echoed in the distance.)

Evening classes were about to begin.

Rudhika closed her notebook.

She realized…

this chapter had not taught her what to believe.

It had taught her how different thinkers approached the same mystery.

And somehow…

that made the mystery even more beautiful.

Together…

they began walking back toward the department building.

Neither noticed that the pond behind them had become perfectly still once again.

As though quietly approving…

(The evening sun painted the campus in shades of amber and gold.

Students slowly disappeared into classrooms, hostels, and the library.

The walking trail, lively only an hour ago, had grown quiet.

Professor Vinay and Rudhika reached the entrance of the Psychology Department.

Neither of them spoke immediately.

Some conversations leave behind a silence that feels complete.)

(Rudhika gently ran her fingers across the cover of her notebook.)

It was filled with ideas.

Questions.

Reflections.

Yet…

there was one question she had been carrying all afternoon.

She looked at Professor Vinay.

There was hesitation in her eyes.

Vinay noticed.

**Professor Vinay**: Something is still on your mind.

(Rudhika looked away.)

**Rudhika**: Professor…

today we've talked about trauma…

anxiety…

loneliness…

and healing.

But…

what if the person who is suffering…

doesn't want to be helped?

(Vinay's expression became gentler.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me about them.

(Rudhika took a slow breath.)

**Rudhika**: It's my sister.

You know…

the one who raised me.

(The words came slowly.)

**Rudhika**: She has always protected me.

She stood between me and my grandparents.

She sacrificed so much so I could study.

She never let me feel alone…

even when she herself was suffering.

(Her voice softened.)

**Rudhika**: A few years ago…

she went through a very painful breakup.

Since then…

she isn't the same.

She smiles less.

She rarely talks about herself.

Sometimes she locks herself in her room for hours.

She says she's fine…

but she doesn't look fine.

Sometimes she doesn't even listen when I try to comfort her.

(Rudhika lowered her eyes.)

**Rudhika**: I feel helpless.

She saved me so many times.

Now…

I don't know how to save her.

(A long silence followed.)

Professor Vinay didn't interrupt.

He allowed every word to settle.

Finally…

he spoke quietly.

**Professor Vinay**: Do you know one of the hardest things for people who love someone deeply?

(Rudhika shook her head.)

**Professor Vinay**: Accepting that love alone cannot remove another person's pain.

Sometimes…

the most loving thing we can do…

is simply remain beside them…

until they're ready to let us in.

(Rudhika's eyes became moist.)

Vinay continued gently.

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

has your sister ever asked for help?

**Rudhika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Has she ever spoken openly about what she's feeling?

**Rudhika**: Very rarely.

Mostly she changes the subject.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Then don't force the conversation.

Keep the door open.

Let her know you're willing to listen whenever she wants.

Sometimes people recovering from heartbreak or depression don't need someone to solve their pain.

They need someone who stays…

without demanding that they recover on a particular timetable.

(Rudhika listened carefully.)

Then she gathered her courage.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

would you…

would you talk to her?

Maybe…

she'll listen to you.

I think she needs someone who understands these things better than I do.

(Vinay was quiet for several moments.)

He answered with warmth…

but also with honesty.

**Professor Vinay**: If she is willing to meet me…

I'd be happy to talk with her.

Not as someone who has all the answers.

Just as someone willing to listen.

Healing often begins there.

(Rudhika looked up for the first time in several minutes.)

Hope quietly returned to her face.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: But promise me something first.

**Rudhika**: Anything.

**Professor Vinay**: Don't carry the burden of believing your sister's recovery

depends entirely on you.

You can love her.

Support her.

Encourage her to seek help if she needs it.

Walk beside her.

But you cannot live her journey for her.

And if her sadness is persistent, severe, or includes thoughts of harming herself, it's important that she gets help from a qualified mental health professional as soon as possible.

(Rudhika nodded slowly.)

For the first time…

she realized that caring for someone…

didn't mean carrying them alone.

The evening bell echoed across the campus.

Professor Vinay picked up his bag.

**Professor Vinay**: Bring your sister someday.

Only if she wishes to come.

No pressure.

Just an invitation.

(Rudhika smiled through tearful eyes.)

**Rudhika**: I will.

They walked toward the department building together.

Behind them…

the breeze gently stirred the leaves of the old banyan tree.

Ahead of them…

another conversation waited.

Not about theories.

Not about philosophers.

But about a young woman…

who had spent years saving her little sister…

and perhaps…

was finally ready to let someone help her too.

**End of Chapter 6**

# The Smile Hidden Behind Silence

(Monday morning.

The Psychology Department was unusually peaceful.

Soft sunlight entered through the tall windows, painting long golden rectangles across the polished floor.

Professor Vinay's office door remained half open, as it always did.

Inside…

books lined every wall.

Psychology.

Neuroscience.

Philosophy.

Sanskrit literature.

History.

Chess.

Plants rested beside the window.

A small wooden chessboard lay on one corner of the table, already arranged as if waiting for someone.

Professor Vinay stood near the bookshelf, arranging a few papers.

A gentle knock interrupted the silence.)

**Professor Vinay**: Come in.

(The door opened slowly.

Rudhika stepped inside.

She smiled…

but only for a moment.

Standing half a step behind her…

was a young woman.

She looked to be around twenty-four.

Simple blue kurta.

Hair tied carelessly.

Dark circles beneath tired eyes.

She wasn't looking at the room.

She wasn't looking at Professor Vinay.

She seemed to be looking…

through everything.

Her hands remained tightly clasped together.

Almost as if they were holding each other together.)

(Rudhika spoke softly.)

**Rudhika**: Good morning, Professor.

(Vinay smiled warmly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Good morning, Rudhika.

(His eyes gently shifted toward the young woman beside her.)

**Professor Vinay**: And you must be…

(Rudhika looked toward her sister.)

**Rudhika**: Professor…

this is my elder sister.

Adhrika.

(The young woman gave a tiny nod.)

**Adhrika**: Hello…

(Barely louder than a whisper.)

(Vinay smiled exactly as he smiled at every student.

No surprise.

No pity.

No curiosity.

Simply kindness.)

**Professor Vinay**: Welcome, Adhrika.

I'm glad you came.

(There was no reply.

Only another small nod.)

(The room became quiet.)

Rudhika looked from her sister…

to Professor Vinay.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

if it's alright…

could I wait outside?

I think…

she might feel more comfortable.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's perfectly fine.

(Rudhika turned toward her sister.)

She gently squeezed Adhrika's hand.

**Rudhika**: I'll be right outside.

Take your time.

(Adhrika nodded once.)

The door closed softly behind Rudhika.

Silence.

Not an awkward silence.

Just…

a room occupied by two strangers.

One waiting patiently.

The other wondering whether she had made a mistake by coming.

(Vinay didn't sit immediately.

Neither did Adhrika.)

After a few moments…

he spoke.

**Professor Vinay**: Tea?

Coffee?

Water?

Juice?

(Adhrika looked slightly surprised by the question.)

She answered quietly.

**Adhrika**: Water…

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Good choice.

(He poured a glass of water and placed it gently on the table.

Not directly in front of her.

Just close enough that she could take it if she wished.)

She quietly picked it up.

Took one sip.

Placed it back.

Another silence.

Vinay finally sat down.

Instead of sitting behind his desk…

he chose the chair beside it.

Leaving the chair opposite him completely free.

An invitation.

Not an interrogation.

After a few moments…

Adhrika slowly sat down as well.

Her eyes wandered across the room.

Books.

Plants.

Chessboard.

Certificates.

Photographs.

Anything except the person sitting beside her.

(Vinay noticed.

He smiled gently.)

**Professor Vinay**: Those books look intimidating.

Don't they?

(For the first time…

the corner of Adhrika's lips moved ever so slightly.)

**Adhrika**: A little.

(Vinay laughed softly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Don't worry.

I've read only some of them.

(That earned the smallest hint of amusement.)

It disappeared almost immediately.

But Vinay noticed it.

He didn't mention it.

He simply continued.

**Professor Vinay**: Rudhika has told me a little about you.

Only a little.

Mostly that she admires you.

(Adhrika looked down.)

**Adhrika**: She shouldn't.

(Vinay didn't argue.)

He simply asked.

**Professor Vinay**: Why?

(Adhrika shrugged.)

**Adhrika**: Nothing special.

(Vinay nodded.)

Another silence.

He wasn't trying to fill every empty moment.

People carrying heavy sadness often need time…

before words feel safe.

Several minutes passed.

Finally…

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: May I ask you something unusual?

(Adhrika looked up briefly.)

**Adhrika**: Hmm?

**Professor Vinay**: Let's make a deal.

No difficult questions for the next five minutes.

Only very easy ones.

You may answer with only one word if you like.

No explanations required.

If you don't want to answer…

just say "pass."

Fair?

(Adhrika looked puzzled.)

Then…

for the first time…

she gave something close to a genuine expression.

A tiny nod.

Vinay clapped his hands together once.

Very softly.

**Professor Vinay**: Excellent.

Welcome…

to the world's easiest game.

(Adhrika blinked.)

**Professor Vinay**: Ready?

(She nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tea…

or coffee?

**Adhrika**: Tea.

**Professor Vinay**: Summer…

or winter?

**Adhrika**: Winter.

**Professor Vinay**: Mountains…

or beaches?

**Adhrika**: Mountains.

**Professor Vinay**: Books…

or movies?

(She hesitated.)

**Adhrika**: Books.

(Vinay smiled dramatically.)

**Professor Vinay**: Ah…

we can still be friends.

(For the first time…

a faint smile appeared.

Small.

Fragile.

But unmistakably real.)

Vinay pretended to sigh in relief.

**Professor Vinay**: Good.

I was worried I'd have to end today's meeting early.

(The smile lasted slightly longer this time.)

Vinay continued.

**Professor Vinay**: Chocolate…

or vanilla?

**Adhrika**: Chocolate.

**Professor Vinay**: Sunrise…

or sunset?

(Adhrika looked toward the window.

She thought for several seconds.)

**Adhrika**: Sunset.

(Vinay nodded thoughtfully.)

**Professor Vinay**: Interesting.

Cats…

or dogs?

(Adhrika answered immediately.)

**Adhrika**: Dogs.

**Professor Vinay**: Fiction…

or biographies?

**Adhrika**: Fiction.

**Professor Vinay**: Rain…

or snow?

**Adhrika**: Rain.

**Professor Vinay**: Writing…

or reading?

**Adhrika**: Reading.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Introvert…

or extrovert?

(For the first time…

she didn't answer immediately.

Instead…

she quietly asked.)

**Adhrika**: Can I say…

"Depends"?

(Vinay's eyes lit up.)

**Professor Vinay**: Absolutely.

Best answer so far.

(Without realizing it…

Adhrika smiled.

A real one.

Tiny.

But undeniably real.

She herself didn't notice it.

Professor Vinay did.

He quietly stored that moment away.

Not as a victory.

But as hope.)

**Professor Vinay**: Good.

Now let's make it a little harder.

(Adhrika raised an eyebrow.)

**Professor Vinay**: One sentence answers are allowed now.

Ready?

(She gave another small nod.)

**Professor Vinay**: What's your favorite season…

and why?

(Adhrika thought for a few seconds.)

**Adhrika**: Rain…

because everything becomes quieter.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's a beautiful answer.

(He continued.)

**Professor Vinay**: If you could spend one day anywhere…

where would you go?

**Adhrika**: Somewhere…

without people.

(Vinay smiled gently.)

**Professor Vinay**: Mountains?

(She nodded.)

**Adhrika**: Yes.

Mountains.

**Professor Vinay**: Good choice.

They're wonderful listeners.

(For the first time…

she let out a tiny laugh.)

It escaped before she could stop it.

She immediately looked away…

almost embarrassed that she had laughed.

Professor Vinay pretended not to notice.

He simply continued asking.

**Professor Vinay**: Morning person…

or night owl?

**Adhrika**: Night.

**Professor Vinay**: Why?

(Adhrika looked toward the window.)

**Adhrika**: Nights don't expect anything from you.

(Vinay quietly absorbed the sentence.)

He didn't analyze it.

He simply nodded.

**Professor Vinay**: Fair enough.

Another question.

Suppose you could instantly master one skill.

Anything.

What would you choose?

(Adhrika looked genuinely thoughtful this time.

Several seconds passed.)

**Adhrika**: Painting…

I think.

**Professor Vinay**: “I think?”

(Adhrika smiled faintly.)

**Adhrika**: Or piano.

Maybe both.

(Vinay laughed.)

**Professor Vinay**: Now we’re negotiating with imaginary superpowers.

I like it.

(Her smile stayed a little longer.)

**Professor Vinay**: Chocolate ice cream…

or mango?

**Adhrika**: Mango.

(Vinay placed a hand dramatically over his heart.)

**Professor Vinay**: I have to admit…

I’m disappointed.

(She looked confused.)

Vinay whispered conspiratorially.

**Professor Vinay**: Chocolate supporters are becoming an endangered species.

(This time…

she laughed properly.

Only for a second.

But it was unmistakably laughter.)

The room felt lighter.

Even the silence had changed.

It was no longer heavy.

It was comfortable.

(Vinay glanced toward the bookshelf.)

**Professor Vinay**: Do you read?

(Adhrika nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Fiction?

History?

Psychology?

Mystery?

**Adhrika**: Mostly novels.

**Professor Vinay**: Favorite one?

(She thought.)

**Adhrika**: The Kite Runner.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: A book that leaves many readers quietly staring at the last page.

(Adhrika looked surprised.)

**Adhrika**: You've read it?

(Vinay pretended to look offended.)

**Professor Vinay**: I do occasionally read books from my own office.

(Another laugh.)

This one came easier.

Without hesitation.

For a brief moment…

the exhausted expression disappeared from her face.

(Vinay looked toward the wooden chessboard resting on the corner of the table.)

**Professor Vinay**: One last question.

(Adhrika followed his gaze.)

Her eyes settled on the chessboard.

**Professor Vinay**: Do you play?

(She shook her head.)

**Adhrika**: Not really.

**Professor Vinay**: "Not really" usually means…

"Yes, but I'm pretending not to."

(She smiled shyly.)

**Adhrika**: My father taught me…

when I was little.

I forgot most of it.

**Professor Vinay**: Then we're equally qualified.

(She looked at him suspiciously.)

**Adhrika**: You're a psychology professor.

(Vinay nodded seriously.)

**Professor Vinay**: Correct.

Not a chess professor.

(She couldn't help smiling again.)

Vinay slowly reached for the board.

He carefully placed it between them.

**Professor Vinay**: No pressure.

Five minutes.

If you win…

you earn bragging rights forever.

If I win…

I still don't get anything.

Seems unfair.

(Adhrika looked at the board.)

Then at Professor Vinay.

Then back at the board.

For nearly half a minute…

she said nothing.

Finally…

she sighed softly.

**Adhrika**: Fine…

Only one game.

(Vinay grinned.)

**Professor Vinay**: Excellent.

Today's first real victory.

(He began arranging the pieces.)

Outside the office…

Rudhika sat on the wooden bench in the corridor.

She couldn't hear their conversation.

But through the small glass window in the door…

she caught a glimpse of something she hadn't seen in months.

Her sister…

was smiling.

(Vinay finished arranging the pieces.)

He gently rotated the board.

**Professor Vinay**: White or black?

(Adhrika looked at the pieces.)

**Adhrika**: White.

**Professor Vinay**: Ladies first.

(She nodded quietly.)

For a few moments…

neither of them spoke.

Only the soft sound of wooden pieces touching the board filled the room.

Adhrika opened with the king's pawn.

Vinay responded immediately.

A few moves later…

she developed her bishop.

Vinay casually moved a knight.

Adhrika frowned slightly.

She looked at the board…

then at him…

then back at the board.

She captured the knight.

Vinay scratched his head dramatically.

**Professor Vinay**: Ah…

I was rather attached to that knight.

(She looked at him.)

**Adhrika**: Then why did you leave it there?

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Sometimes knights like going on adventures.

(She shook her head.)

**Adhrika**: That's not how chess works.

(Vinay raised both hands.)

**Professor Vinay**: Fair point.

(She continued playing.)

Five minutes later…

Vinay's queen disappeared from the board.

He stared at the empty square.

**Professor Vinay**: I had a queen?

(Adhrika blinked.)

Then…

without warning…

she laughed.

A genuine laugh.

Not loud.

Not long.

But real.

Outside…

Rudhika looked through the small glass window.

She couldn't hear what had happened.

She only saw her sister covering her mouth…

trying to stop herself from laughing.

Rudhika's eyes slowly widened.

She lowered her head.

A smile spread across her own face.

Quietly…

she whispered to herself.

**Rudhika**: Thank you…

Professor.

(Inside the office…)

the game continued.

Vinay leaned back.

**Professor Vinay**: I have a feeling…

I'm in serious trouble.

(Adhrika looked at the board.)

**Adhrika**: You already are.

(Vinay placed a hand on his chest.)

**Professor Vinay**: Such confidence.

I'm proud.

(A few moves later…)

his king had nowhere left to escape.

Adhrika moved her queen.

**Adhrika**: Checkmate.

(Vinay stared at the board for several seconds.)

Then he nodded solemnly.

**Professor Vinay**: An honorable defeat.

Congratulations.

(She smiled shyly.)

**Adhrika**: Thank you.

(Vinay began arranging the pieces again.)

**Professor Vinay**: One more?

(She hesitated.)

Only for a moment.

**Adhrika**: Okay.

But this time…

don't lose so quickly.

(Vinay widened his eyes innocently.)

**Professor Vinay**: Excuse me?

I'm giving my best.

(She folded her arms.)

**Adhrika**: No.

You're not.

(Vinay tilted his head.)

**Professor Vinay**: Oh?

(Adhrika pointed toward the board.)

**Adhrika**: You saw my queen hanging twice.

You ignored it.

Then you sacrificed your rook for no reason.

And…

you walked straight into checkmate.

Nobody does that accidentally.

(Vinay couldn't hold back a soft laugh.)

He rubbed the back of his neck.

**Professor Vinay**: I suppose…

I wasn't as subtle as I imagined.

(Adhrika pouted slightly.)

**Adhrika**: You're letting me win.

(Vinay looked at her for a quiet moment.

Then he smiled warmly.)

**Professor Vinay**: My purpose wasn't to win…

it was to see you smile.

(The room became still.)

Adhrika's expression softened.

She looked away almost immediately trying to hide her blushed cheeks.

Trying very hard to hide the smile that had returned to her face.

**Adhrika**: That's cheating.

(Vinay chuckled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Is it?

(Adhrika nodded.)

**Adhrika**: A little.

(Vinay laughed.)

**Professor Vinay**: Then I'm guilty.

This time…

I'll play properly.

No mercy.

(Adhrika looked back at the board.

The old spark that had been hidden beneath months of silence flickered for just an instant.

She straightened in her chair.

A tiny smile appeared.)

**Adhrika**: Good.

Because I was going to beat you anyway.

Vinay grinned.

**Professor Vinay**: Now that's the confidence I was waiting for.

He reached for the king's pawn.

**Professor Vinay**: Your move.

(The second game began.

Unlike before…

Professor Vinay no longer made obviously careless moves.

He developed his pieces calmly.

Adhrika watched the board with surprising concentration.

Her fingers hovered over a knight.

She hesitated.

Then moved it.)

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Nice.

Controlling the center already.

(Adhrika looked up.)

**Adhrika**: My father always used to say…

“If you don’t fight for the center…

the game slowly slips away.”

(The words escaped her mouth before she realized what she had said.)

Her hand stopped moving.

The smile faded.

For a brief moment…

the room became quiet again.

Vinay didn’t interrupt the silence.

He simply made his move.

Several more moves passed.

Adhrika slowly relaxed again.

She attacked his bishop.

Vinay retreated.

She smiled proudly.

**Adhrika**: See?

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Nicely done.

(A few moves later…

Vinay leaned closer to the board.)

**Professor Vinay**: Hmm…

I seem to have created a problem for myself.

(Adhrika looked carefully.

She studied every square.

Her eyes moved between the pieces.

Nearly a minute passed.

Then…

she looked up.)

**Adhrika**: You're trying to distract me.

(Vinay blinked innocently.)

**Professor Vinay**: Me?

Never.

(She pointed at the board.)

**Adhrika**: If I take your bishop…

your queen comes here.

Then…

check.

(Vinay looked at the position.

He slowly smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Very good.

You saw it.

(She shrugged.)

**Adhrika**: It wasn't that difficult.

(Vinay laughed.)

**Professor Vinay**: It wasn't…

because you found it.

(Outside…

Rudhika shifted slightly on the bench.

She looked at the closed office door.

The conversation had been going on for almost an hour.

She expected her sister to walk out by now.

Instead…

she heard something.

A laugh.

Soft…

but unmistakable.

She closed her eyes.

A tear rolled gently down her cheek.

Not from sadness.

From relief.

She quickly wiped it away before anyone passing through the corridor could

notice.)

(Inside…

the game entered its final stage.

Only a few pieces remained.

Adhrika's brow furrowed.

Vinay rested his chin on one hand.

Neither of them spoke.

Finally…

Adhrika moved her rook.

Vinay looked at the board.

Then at her.

Then back at the board.)

(He smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Checkmate.

(She looked uncertain.)

**Adhrika**: Really?

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Unless I've secretly invented a new version of chess…

yes.

(She stared at the board for another few seconds.

Then…

a smile slowly spread across her face.

This time…

she didn't try to hide it.

She leaned back in her chair.)

**Adhrika**: I actually won.

(Vinay folded his hands dramatically.)

**Professor Vinay**: Twice.

Against a university professor.

I suppose my reputation is ruined.

(She giggled.)

**Adhrika**: You're exaggerating.

**Professor Vinay**: I prefer the word "dramatic."

(She shook her head.)

**Adhrika**: Definitely dramatic.

(Vinay placed the last captured piece back into the box.

Then he looked at her.

Not as a professor examining a student.

Not as someone searching for answers.

Just as one human being looking at another.)

**Professor Vinay**: May I tell you something?

(Adhrika nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: When you first walked into this room…

you hardly looked at me.

You answered with nods.

Mostly one-word replies.

Now…

you've defeated me twice…

accused me of cheating…

called me dramatic…

and laughed more than once.

(Adhrika lowered her eyes.

A faint blush appeared across her cheeks.)

(Vinay smiled gently.)

**Professor Vinay**: I think…

that's a much better beginning than either of us expected.

(For a few moments…

she simply looked at the chessboard.

Her fingers lightly touched one of the pawns.

She took a slow breath.

Then another.

Finally…

she spoke.

Her voice was quiet.

But no longer distant.)

**Adhrika**: Professor…

can I ask you something?

**Professor Vinay**: Of course.

(Adhrika looked out of the window.

The smile that had returned so briefly faded into something deeper.

Something heavier.)

**Adhrika**: Do you think…

someone can forget…

a person they truly loved?

(Vinay looked at her for a few moments.

He didn't answer immediately.

Instead…

he slowly closed the chessboard.

One by one…

he placed every piece back into its compartment.

The king.

The queen.

The bishops.

The knights.

The rooks.

Finally…

the pawns.

He closed the lid gently.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's a very important question.

And I don't think it deserves a rushed answer.

(Adhrika nodded quietly.)

(Vinay stood up.

He walked toward the small shelf near the window and poured two glasses of water.

He handed one to her.

She accepted it with both hands.

Neither of them spoke.

The silence no longer felt uncomfortable.

It felt…

safe.

Vinay returned to his chair.)

**Professor Vinay**: Before I answer…

may I ask you something?

**Adhrika**: Hmm.

**Professor Vinay**: Is this question about someone…

or about yourself?

(She looked down at the glass in her hands.)

(For several seconds…

nothing moved except her thumb tracing its rim.

Finally…)

she gave the smallest nod.

**Adhrika**: Myself.

(Vinay nodded gently.)

**Professor Vinay**: I thought so.

(Another quiet silence filled the room.)

Outside…

Rudhika remained seated on the wooden bench.

She had stopped worrying.

Instead…

she found herself wondering what they were talking about.

Whatever it was…

it had already given her sister something she hadn't seen in a very long time.

A reason to smile.

Inside…

Adhrika took a slow breath.

Then another.

She looked at Professor Vinay.

For the first time since entering the room…

she met his eyes without quickly looking away.

**Adhrika**: Professor…

I don't think I've ever told this story to anyone.

Not completely.

Not even Rudhika.

(Vinay remained silent.

He didn't reach for a notebook.

He didn't interrupt.

He simply listened.)

Adhrika lowered her gaze again.

Her fingers tightened around the glass.

**Adhrika**: I don't even know where to begin…

(Vinay smiled softly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Then don't begin where it hurts the most.

Begin wherever your heart finds it easiest.

There is no right order for telling a story.

Only your order.

(Adhrika closed her eyes for a brief moment.

When she opened them again…

they carried the weight of memories she had been holding alone for years.)

**Adhrika**: Then…

I guess…

it started the day I met him.

(For a long time…

Adhrika simply looked at the floor.

As though the memories were scattered there.

Waiting to be picked up…

one by one.)

**Adhrika**: It was…

about four years ago.

I had just started college.

I wasn't looking for a relationship.

Honestly…

I never even thought about it.

I was happy with my little world.

College.

Home.

Books.

Rudhika.

That was enough.

(She smiled faintly.)

**Adhrika**: Then…

one day…

he sat beside me in the library.

There were dozens of empty seats.

But…

he chose that one.

I remember thinking…

“What a strange person.”

(Vinay smiled quietly but said nothing.)

Adhrika continued.

**Adhrika**: We didn’t even speak that day.

The next day…

he was there again.

Then again.

Then…

one afternoon…

he asked if he could borrow my notes.

I almost said no.

But…

I gave them to him.

(She let out a soft, nostalgic laugh.)

**Adhrika**: He returned them the very next day.

Every page…

covered neatly.

Not a single fold.

Not a single stain.

He even thanked me with a small handwritten note.

No one had ever done something like that before.

I don't know why…

but I kept that little piece of paper.

For years.

(She paused.)

**Adhrika**: We became friends.

Slowly.

Very slowly.

He was funny.

Not the loud kind.

The quiet kind.

He knew exactly how to make me laugh…

without trying too hard.

He remembered small things.

Which author I liked.

My favorite tea.

The songs I skipped.

The flowers I always stopped to look at while walking home.

Sometimes…

he remembered those things better than I did.

(Her eyes became distant.)

**Adhrika**: Nobody had ever paid that much attention to me.

Not like that.

I think…

that's when I started falling in love.

(She smiled.

Then…

almost immediately…

the smile disappeared.)

**Adhrika**: At least…

I thought it was love.

(Professor Vinay remained completely still.

His full attention rested on her words.)

Adhrika took a slow breath.

**Adhrika**: We spent almost every day together.

Studied together.

Walked together.

Celebrated birthdays.

Shared dreams.

We even talked about the future.

Not every day…

but often enough that it felt…

real.

(She swallowed.)

**Adhrika**: I trusted him.

Completely.

More than I had trusted anyone outside my family.

Maybe…

even more than I trusted myself.

(Her fingers tightened around the glass.)

**Adhrika**: When people asked…

“How are you two?”

I would smile without thinking.

Because somewhere inside…

I had already begun imagining a life with him.

A home.

A family.

Growing old together.

(Silence filled the room.)

She stared through the window.

The sunlight that had seemed warm only moments ago now felt strangely distant.

Adhrika’s voice became quieter.

Almost fragile.

**Adhrika**: Then…

little things began changing.

At first…

I told myself I was imagining them.

He became busy.

Replies became shorter.

Calls became fewer.

Plans were cancelled.

Smiles became polite instead of genuine.

I kept making excuses for him.

“He’s stressed.”

“He’s tired.”

“He’ll be fine after exams.”

“I shouldn’t overthink.”

(She shook her head slowly.)

**Adhrika**: It’s strange…

how easily we become lawyers…

defending the people we love.

Even when they never asked us to.

(Her eyes began to glisten.)

**Adhrika**: I didn’t notice…

or maybe I didn’t want to notice…

that I was the only one still holding on.

(She stopped speaking.)

The room fell silent once again.

Professor Vinay didn’t rush to fill it.

He simply sat there…

listening.

Waiting.

Giving her heart the time it needed before speaking again.

(Adhrika closed her eyes.

A tear escaped before she realized it.

She quickly wiped it away.)

**Adhrika**: One evening…

I asked him…

“Is everything okay?”

He smiled.

The same smile I’d fallen in love with.

Then he said…

“You’re overthinking.”

(She laughed softly.)

It wasn’t a happy laugh.

It carried exhaustion.

**Adhrika**: So…

I believed him.

I apologized…

for asking.

(Vinay’s expression remained calm.

He didn’t interrupt.)

**Adhrika**: Weeks passed.

Then months.

He was still there…

but not really.

Sometimes we'd sit together…

and it felt like I was sitting beside a stranger wearing the face of someone I loved.

I kept trying harder.

I called first.

I texted first.

I planned everything.

I apologized…

even when I didn't know what I had done wrong.

(Her voice became quieter.)

**Adhrika**: Every morning…

I wondered…

"What can I do today to make him happy again?"

Every night…

I blamed myself because I couldn't.

(She looked at her trembling hands.)

**Adhrika**: It was exhausting.

But…

I thought…

that's what love is.

You don't give up.

You keep trying.

Even if you're the only one trying.

(A long silence followed.)

The ticking of the wall clock became strangely noticeable.

Adhrika stared at the chessboard.

Her fingertip gently touched one of the pawns still lying beside the closed box.

**Adhrika**: Then…

one day…

he asked if we could meet.

His voice sounded different.

Calm.

Too calm.

I knew…

something was wrong.

(Another tear rolled down her cheek.)

**Adhrika**: We met at the little café where we'd had our first cup of tea together.

I remember everything.

The smell of cardamom.

The old songs playing in the background.

Even the rain outside.

Everything…

except how to breathe.

(She smiled bitterly.)

**Adhrika**: He didn't look at me.

Not once.

He kept staring into his cup.

Then…

he said…

“I don’t think this is working anymore.”

(Her lips trembled.)

**Adhrika**: Just one sentence.

One sentence…

and the future I’d been building in my mind for years…

collapsed.

(She swallowed hard.)

**Adhrika**: I asked him why.

He said…

“I’ve changed.”

I asked…

“Did I do something wrong?”

He shook his head.

I asked…

“Can we fix it?”

He said…

“I don’t want to.”

(Her voice broke.)

**Adhrika**: That hurt more than anything else.

Not because he wanted to leave…

but because…

he had already left long before that day.

I was the last person to realize it.

(Tears now flowed freely down her face.)

She made no attempt to stop them.

**Adhrika**: I begged him…

Professor.

I actually begged him.

I promised I'd change.

I promised I'd become better.

I asked for one more chance.

Just one.

(She lowered her head.)

**Adhrika**: Looking back…

I don't even recognize that girl.

But at that moment…

I would have done anything…

just to hear him say…

"Stay."

(Her breathing became uneven.)

She covered her face with both hands.

For several moments…

she couldn't continue.

Professor Vinay quietly slid the box of tissues across the table.

He didn't speak.

He didn’t say,

“It’s okay.”

He didn’t say,

“Be strong.”

He simply remained there.

Present.

Patient.

When Adhrika had wiped her eyes…

she looked up again.

Her eyes were red.

Her voice had become almost a whisper.

**Adhrika**: He stood up.

He said…

“I’m sorry.”

(Then he walked away.)

**Adhrika**: I kept sitting there.

I don’t know for how long.

People came.

People left.

The waiter asked if I wanted anything else.

I don’t even remember answering him.

I just remember looking at the empty chair across from me…

hoping…

he would come back and say…

“I made a mistake.”

(She smiled sadly.)

**Adhrika**: He never did.

(Once again…

the room fell into silence.

Outside…

the corridor bustled with students changing classes.

Inside the office…

time itself seemed to slow.

Professor Vinay didn’t rush to respond.

He allowed her story…

and her grief…

to settle into the quiet between them.)

(The silence remained.

Not because Professor Vinay didn’t know what to say…

but because some moments deserve to be heard…

before they are answered.

A gentle breeze entered through the open window.

It stirred the leaves of the small plant resting on the sill.

Adhrika stared at the table.

Her voice had become tired.

Almost empty.)

**Adhrika**: After that…

everything reminded me of him.

Songs.

Roads.

Rain.

Tea.

Books.

Even sunsets.

I stopped listening to music.

I stopped reading novels.

I stopped going to places we used to visit.

(She gave a faint, weary smile.)

**Adhrika**: It felt like the whole world had conspired against me.

Everywhere I looked…

there was another memory waiting.

Another reason to cry.

(Vinay listened quietly.)

**Adhrika**: Rudhika tried so many times to cheer me up.

She never gave up.

But…

I couldn't tell her everything.

She's my younger sister.

She's supposed to lean on me…

not the other way around.

(Her eyes filled again.)

**Adhrika**: I watched her pretending not to worry.

Pretending not to notice that I barely ate.

Pretending not to notice that I stayed awake all night.

Sometimes…

I'd hear her crying quietly in her room.

Because of me.

(She covered her eyes.)

**Adhrika**: I became the very thing I always promised I'd never become…

another burden for her.

(The words hung in the air.)

For the first time since she had entered the room…

Professor Vinay spoke.

His voice was calm.

(Almost gentle enough to become part of the silence.)

**Professor Vinay**: Adhrika…

may I ask you a question?

(She nodded weakly.)

**Professor Vinay**: If Rudhika were sitting where you are…

telling me the same story…

would you think she was a burden?

(Adhrika answered immediately.)

**Adhrika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Why not?

(Adhrika looked surprised by the question.)

**Adhrika**: Because…

she'd be hurting.

She'd need someone.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Then why does kindness apply to her…

but not to you?

(Adhrika opened her mouth…

then closed it again.)

She searched for an answer.

None came.

Vinay continued softly.

**Professor Vinay**: You've given compassion to everyone in your story.

To him.

To Rudhika.

Even to strangers.

But somewhere along the way…

you quietly removed yourself from the list of people allowed to receive it.

(Adhrika lowered her eyes.)

A tear fell onto the back of her hand.

Vinay didn't stop.

His tone remained warm.

Never accusing.

Never correcting.

Simply inviting her to think.

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me honestly…

during those months after the breakup…

what hurt you the most?

Was it loneliness?

Was it rejection?

Was it losing the future you imagined?

Or was it something else?

(Adhrika sat very still.

She thought for a long time.

Long enough that the ticking clock once again became noticeable.)

Finally…

she whispered.

**Adhrika**: I think…

it was the feeling…

that I wasn't enough.

That if I had been prettier…

or smarter…

or more interesting…

he would have stayed.

(Her voice cracked.)

**Adhrika**: Every day…

I kept asking myself…

"What was wrong with me?"

(She looked directly at Professor Vinay for the first time since telling her story.)

**Adhrika**: Professor…

was I not enough?

(Professor Vinay did not answer immediately.

Instead…

he leaned back slightly.

Not to create distance…

but to give the question the space it deserved.

He looked at Adhrika for a long moment.

Then he spoke.)

**Professor Vinay**: May I answer your question…

with a few questions of my own?

(Adhrika gave a faint nod.)

**Professor Vinay**: Suppose…

a gardener plants two roses.

He waters both.

Cares for both.

One blooms beautifully.

The other is uprooted by a passerby.

Tell me…

was the second rose less beautiful…

because someone pulled it out?

(Adhrika looked down.)

She slowly shook her head.

**Adhrika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Why not?

**Adhrika**: Because…

someone else's action…

doesn't decide its beauty.

(Vinay smiled gently.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

(He allowed the words to settle.)

**Professor Vinay**: Now another question.

If someone walks into a library…

looks around for five minutes…

and says,

"There are no good books here."

Does that statement suddenly become true?

**Adhrika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Why?

**Adhrika**: Because…

they didn't really know the books.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Sometimes…

people leave relationships for reasons that genuinely have nothing to do with the other person's worth.

Sometimes they change.

Sometimes they become confused.

Sometimes they make poor decisions.

Sometimes…

they simply choose a different path.

Whatever the reason…

their choice is still their choice.

It is not a measuring tape for your value.

(Adhrika listened quietly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Let me ask you one more thing.

During your relationship…

did he ever tell you…

“You are not enough”?

(She immediately shook her head.)

**Adhrika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Then…

who kept repeating those words?

(She froze.)

Her lips parted slightly.

The answer came almost as a whisper.

**Adhrika**: …

I did.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: After he left…

his footsteps disappeared.

But another voice remained.

A much harsher one.

Your own.

(Adhrika stared silently at the table.)

**Professor Vinay**: Every morning…

who reminded you that you weren't enough?

(Adhrika closed her eyes.)

**Adhrika**: Me.

**Professor Vinay**: Every night…

who replayed every conversation?

**Adhrika**: Me.

**Professor Vinay**: Who searched for imaginary mistakes…

hoping to find a reason?

(Her eyes slowly filled again.)

**Adhrika**: Me…

(Vinay's voice remained calm.)

**Professor Vinay**: Then perhaps…

the person who has hurt you the longest…

is no longer the man who walked away.

(He paused.)

**Professor Vinay**: It's the voice that stayed behind.

(The room became silent.)

Adhrika wasn't offended.

She wasn't defensive.

She simply sat there…

thinking.

For the first time…

not about him.

But about herself.

After nearly a minute…

she spoke.

**Adhrika**: Professor…

how do I make that voice stop?

Because…

I'm tired.

So…

so tired.

(She looked utterly exhausted.)

Not exhausted from crying.

Not exhausted from missing someone.

Exhausted from fighting herself.

Professor Vinay folded his hands gently.

His expression was filled with compassion.

**Professor Vinay**: I don't think we begin by trying to silence that voice.

(Adhrika looked up.)

**Professor Vinay**: We begin…

by questioning whether it deserves to be believed.

(She frowned slightly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Just because a thought appears…

doesn't make it true.

Just because the mind repeats something a thousand times…

doesn't make it a fact.

Our minds are capable of imagination…

memory…

creativity…

and unfortunately…

self-deception too.

(He smiled softly.)

**Professor Vinay**: The mind is a wonderful servant.

But not always a reliable witness.

(Adhrika sat quietly…

absorbing every word.)

She had come into the room believing she needed an answer about the man who had left.

For the first time…

she began to wonder whether the more important question…

was about the voice that never had.

(Adhrika remained silent.

She lowered her eyes once again.

Her fingers gently traced the edge of the empty glass.

Several thoughts seemed to be passing through her mind at once.

Finally…

she spoke.)

**Adhrika**: Professor…

may I ask you something else?

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Of course.

(Adhrika took a slow breath.)

**Adhrika**: If…

what I'm feeling isn't because I wasn't enough…

then why does it still hurt so much?

It's been so long.

I know he's gone.

I know he isn't coming back.

I tell myself that every day.

But…

(her voice trembled)

…why can't my heart understand what my mind already knows?

(Vinay remained thoughtful.

He didn't answer immediately.

Instead…

he asked quietly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

if someone loses a very dear pet dog…

would they cry?

(Adhrika looked slightly surprised.)

**Adhrika**: Of course.

**Professor Vinay**: Even if they knew…

from the very first day they adopted it…

that a dog's life is much shorter than a human's?

(She nodded.)

**Adhrika**: Yes.

**Professor Vinay**: Why?

(Adhrika looked down.)

She thought carefully.

**Adhrika**: Because…

they become attached.

(Vinay nodded gently.)

**Professor Vinay**: Yes.

Attachment.

(He paused.)

**Professor Vinay**: Notice something interesting.

The pain isn't caused because they were wrong to love the dog.

The pain comes because the mind keeps saying,

"It shouldn't have ended."

(Adhrika listened quietly.)

**Professor Vinay**: The heart says,

"I miss someone precious."

The attached mind says,

"I cannot accept that they're gone."

Those are not exactly the same.

(Adhrika frowned slightly.)

**Adhrika**: But…

isn't attachment part of love?

I always thought…

if you truly love someone…

you naturally become attached.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Many people believe that.

May I ask you another question?

(She nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: If I hold this glass gently…

am I holding it?

**Adhrika**: Yes.

**Professor Vinay**: If I squeeze it with all my strength…

afraid someone might take it away…

am I still holding it?

(She looked at the glass in her hands.)

**Adhrika**: Yes…

**Professor Vinay**: Is it the same kind of holding?

(She became thoughtful.)

After a few moments…

she slowly shook her head.

**Adhrika**: No.

One is…

gentle.

The other…

is fear.

(Vinay's smile widened.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Love can hold.

Attachment clings.

Love appreciates.

Attachment possesses.

Love says,

"I'm grateful our paths crossed."

Attachment says,

"I cannot allow our paths to separate."

(The room became quiet.)

Adhrika wasn't convinced yet.

She leaned forward slightly.

**Adhrika**: But…

if there is no attachment…

wouldn't people leave each other easily?

Wouldn't love become…

cold?

(Vinay chuckled softly.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's a wonderful question.

In fact…

it's one that philosophers have discussed for centuries.

(He leaned back in his chair.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

have you ever seen parents sitting quietly in a park…

watching their little child learn to walk?

(Adhrika nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: What do they want?

For the child to remain dependent forever?

Or…

for the child to eventually walk confidently on their own?

(Adhrika answered almost immediately.)

**Adhrika**: To walk on their own.

**Professor Vinay**: Even though that means…

one day the child may move away…

build a different life…

and not need them every moment?

(She nodded again.)

**Adhrika**: Yes.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Isn't that interesting?

Real love rejoices in another person's growth…

even when that growth creates distance.

(Adhrika lowered her gaze.)

She didn't speak.

But something in her expression had changed.

Not agreement.

Not yet.

Curiosity.

She looked back at Professor Vinay.

**Adhrika**: Then…

what exactly is love?

And…

if attachment isn't love…

how do I know which one I was feeling?

(The question lingered quietly between them.

Professor Vinay folded his hands.

A gentle smile appeared on his face.

He knew…

they had finally arrived at the conversation that mattered most.)

(Vinay remained quiet for several moments.

He looked toward the window.

Students crossed the courtyard below.

Some walked alone.

Some laughed with friends.

Some hurried toward their next class.

Life…

without asking anyone's permission…

continued moving.)

**Professor Vinay**: Before I answer…

I'd like to ask you about someone else.

Not you.

Not him.

Would that be alright?

(Adhrika nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Imagine an elderly woman.

She has a small garden.

Every morning…

she waters the flowers.

Removes dry leaves.

Protects them from insects.

One day…

a traveler passes by.

He stops for a while.

Looks at the flowers.

Smiles.

The old woman notices that he especially likes one white jasmine plant.

So…

before he leaves…

she cuts a single blossom.

Places it gently in his hand.

And says,

"I hope its fragrance stays with you."

(He looked at Adhrika.)

**Professor Vinay**: Tell me…

did she love her flower?

**Adhrika**: Yes.

**Professor Vinay**: Then why did she let it go?

(Adhrika thought.)

**Adhrika**: Because…

sharing it didn't reduce her love.

(Vinay smiled softly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Good.

Now imagine a different gardener.

He builds high walls.

Locks the gate.

Lets no one enter.

He fears someone may touch his flowers.

He checks them every hour.

He becomes anxious whenever the wind is strong.

Tell me…

who is he protecting?

The flowers?

Or his fear?

(Adhrika answered after a pause.)

**Adhrika**: …

His fear.

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Exactly.

Sometimes…

what we call love…

is actually fear wearing love's clothes.

Fear of being abandoned.

Fear of being replaced.

Fear of being alone.

Fear of losing the future we imagined.

(Adhrika listened intently.)

**Professor Vinay**: Love and fear can exist together.

But they are not the same thing.

Fear whispers,

"If this person leaves…

I will become incomplete."

Love whispers,

"I am grateful you exist…

whether or not life allows us to walk together forever."

(The room fell silent.)

Adhrika looked down.

**Adhrika**: I don't think…

I ever said those words.

"I'm grateful."

I mostly kept thinking…

"I hope he never leaves."

(Vinay didn't say "Exactly."

Instead…)

**Professor Vinay**: Which sentence filled more of your days?

"I enjoy today's conversation."

Or…

"I hope nothing ruins tomorrow."

(She closed her eyes.)

Memories surfaced.

Waiting for messages.

Checking her phone.

Reading old conversations.

Feeling relieved when he replied.

Feeling anxious when he didn't.

She opened her eyes again.

**Adhrika**: …

The second one.

Almost every day.

(Vinay nodded slowly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Then perhaps…

your love slowly became surrounded by anxiety.

Not because you chose it.

Not because you were weak.

Simply because the human mind often confuses closeness…

with certainty.

And life rarely offers certainty.

(He picked up a single white pawn from the chessboard box that still sat nearby.)

He placed it gently on the table.

**Professor Vinay**: Look at this pawn.

When the game begins…

it stands beside seven others.

As the game continues…

pieces leave the board.

Some are captured.

Some survive.

Can the pawn refuse to play…

because one day it may disappear?

(Adhrika smiled faintly.)

**Adhrika**: No.

**Professor Vinay**: Can it demand,

“I’ll only play if every piece stays forever”?

(She let out the smallest laugh.)

**Adhrika**: That wouldn’t be chess anymore.

**Professor Vinay**: Precisely.

Life asks something similar of us.

It never promises,

“Nothing you love will change.”

It only offers the chance…

to love while it is here.

(The pawn remained between them.)

**Professor Vinay**: There is an old insight found in many traditions.

It can be expressed in different words, but the idea is similar:

Suffering grows when the mind insists that what is changing…

must not change.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't grieve.

Grief is natural.

When someone dear leaves our life…

whether through distance, choice, or death…

our hearts ache.

That ache is part of loving.

But there is another layer we often add ourselves.

The argument with reality.

"If only…"

"It wasn't supposed to happen."

"I cannot accept this."

Those thoughts keep reopening the wound.

(Adhrika's eyes rested on the pawn.)

**Adhrika**: So…

missing someone…

isn't the same as refusing to let them go?

(Vinay's expression brightened.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's an important distinction.

Yes.

You can miss someone deeply…

and still accept that they are no longer part of your life.

Acceptance doesn't erase affection.

It simply stops fighting what is already true.

(A long silence followed.)

This time…

it wasn't heavy.

It was thoughtful.

After nearly a minute…

Adhrika spoke.

Her voice was softer than before.

**Adhrika**: Professor…

I think…

for two years…

I wasn't trying to get him back.

I was trying to get my old life back.

The one where I believed everything would be okay.

(Vinay looked at her with quiet appreciation.)

He didn't praise her.

He didn't say,

"That's the answer."

He simply asked one final question.

**Professor Vinay**: And if that old life cannot return…

does that necessarily mean…

a meaningful new one cannot begin?

(Adhrika didn't answer.

Not because she disagreed.

But because…

for the first time in a very long while…

the possibility had never occurred to her.)

(The room grew quiet once more.

Outside…

the last lecture of the day had ended.

Students walked through the corridors.

Some laughed loudly.

Some hurried toward the gates.

Some complained about assignments.

Life…

continued with its ordinary rhythm.

Inside the office…

three people sat in extraordinary silence.

Not because there was nothing left to say.

But because some truths need silence more than words.)

Adhrika looked out of the window.

For the first time since she had begun telling her story…

she wasn't looking at the past.

She was simply…

looking.

After a long while…

she spoke.

**Adhrika**: Professor…

do you think…

I'll ever stop loving him?

(Vinay smiled gently.)

**Professor Vinay**: I don't know.

(She looked surprised.)

**Professor Vinay**: And I don't think that's the question I'd ask.

(She waited.)

**Professor Vinay**: I'd ask…

"What will that love become?"

People often imagine there are only two possibilities.

Either…

you love forever exactly as you do today…

or…

you stop loving completely.

Life is usually kinder…

and more subtle…

than that.

Sometimes love changes its shape.

It becomes gratitude.

Sometimes…

it becomes a lesson.

Sometimes…

it becomes a quiet blessing from a distance.

Sometimes…

it simply becomes part of who you are…

without asking anything from the other person.

(Adhrika listened carefully.)

**Professor Vinay**: Memories don't always need to disappear.

Sometimes…

they simply stop demanding that yesterday return.

(A tear rolled down Adhrika's cheek.

This time…

she didn't wipe it away immediately.)

It wasn't the desperate tear of someone drowning.

It felt…

lighter.

Almost peaceful.

After a few moments…

she smiled faintly.

**Adhrika**: I don't think I understand all of that yet.

(Vinay chuckled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Neither do I.

Not completely.

Every human being keeps learning.

Even professors.

(She laughed.)

A genuine laugh.

Not loud.

Not long.

But real.

(Vinay smiled with her.)

**Professor Vinay**: May I give you a small assignment?

(Adhrika raised an eyebrow.)

**Adhrika**: Homework?

**Professor Vinay**: The easiest homework you'll ever receive.

She folded her arms playfully.

**Adhrika**: Psychology professors always say that.

(Vinay laughed.)

**Professor Vinay**: Fair criticism.

(Then he became thoughtful.)

**Professor Vinay**: For one week…

don't try to stop your thoughts.

Don't fight them.

Don't chase them either.

Whenever your mind says,

"I wasn't enough…"

don't argue with it.

Simply ask one question.

“Is this a fact…

or is this a story my hurting mind is telling?”

Nothing more.

Don’t force an answer.

Just ask.

Every single time.

(Adhrika repeated the question softly.)

**Adhrika**: A fact…

or a story…

(Vinay nodded.)

**Professor Vinay**: Curiosity often succeeds where force fails.

(The words settled gently into the room.)

A few moments later…

there was a knock.

Rudhika slowly opened the door.

She peeked inside.

**Rudhika**: Am I interrupting?

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Not at all.

Come in.

(Rudhika entered quietly.

Her eyes immediately searched her sister’s face.)

She noticed the tears.

Her heart sank for a brief moment.

Then…

she noticed something else.

Her sister's shoulders were no longer as tense.

The lines on her forehead had softened.

And…

there it was.

A small smile.

Barely visible.

But unmistakably there.

(Rudhika's own eyes became moist.)

She walked over without saying anything.

Adhrika looked at her…

and smiled again.

This one was even smaller.

But it reached her eyes.

Rudhika couldn't stop herself.

She wrapped her sister in a gentle hug.

Adhrika hesitated…

then hugged her back.

Not out of obligation.

Out of affection.

For several seconds…

neither of them spoke.

(Vinay quietly looked away.

Some moments belong entirely to the people living them.)

When they finally separated…

Rudhika turned toward him.

**Rudhika**: Thank you, Professor.

(Vinay shook his head.)

**Professor Vinay**: Don’t thank me.

Your sister did the difficult part today.

She chose honesty.

That takes courage.

(Adhrika looked down shyly.)

Vinay stood and walked them toward the door.

As they reached it…

he spoke one last time.

**Professor Vinay**: Adhrika.

(She turned.)

**Professor Vinay**: Don’t measure today’s success by whether you stopped hurting.

Measure it by something much smaller.

You walked into this room carrying your pain alone.

You’re walking out having shared it.

Sometimes…

that is the first real step toward healing.

(She stood still for a moment.

Then she nodded.)

**Adhrika**: Thank you…

Professor.

Not because you fixed me.

But…

because you didn't try to.

You just…

stayed.

(Vinay smiled warmly.)

**Professor Vinay**: Human beings are not broken machines.

They don't always need fixing.

Sometimes…

they need someone willing to sit beside them while they find their own way.

(Adhrika carried those words with her.)

The two sisters stepped into the corridor.

The evening sun poured through the tall windows.

Students passed by without noticing them.

Rudhika glanced sideways.

**Rudhika**: Tea?

(Adhrika looked at her.)

For months…

her answer would have been,

"I'm not in the mood."

Today…

after thinking for a moment…

she answered differently.

**Adhrika**: Yes.

Tea sounds nice.

(Rudhika grinned.)

The two sisters walked slowly toward the college gate.

Not because all the pain had vanished.

It hadn't.

Not because every question had been answered.

They hadn't.

But because…

for the first time in a long time…

the future no longer looked like a closed door.

Behind them…

Professor Vinay stood by the office window.

He watched them leave.

He smiled.

Then he quietly returned to his desk.

The chessboard still lay there.

He opened it again.

The pieces were scattered from the afternoon's games.

One by one…

he placed each piece back in its proper place.

The king.

The queen.

The bishops.

The knights.

The rooks.

The pawns.

He looked at the completed board for a moment.

Then he softly whispered to the empty room.

**Professor Vinay**: Healing is a little like chess.

You cannot undo the moves already played.

But…

you can always choose your next move.

(He closed the chessboard gently.

Outside…

the sun dipped below the horizon.

Inside…

a new chapter had quietly begun.)

**End of Chapter 7**

# Epilogue - The Quiet Beginning

(Three weeks later.)

(The Psychology Department looked much the same.

The same books.

The same plants.

The same chessboard rested quietly on the shelf.

Only the season had changed.

The first hints of autumn drifted through the open windows.)

There was a gentle knock.

**Professor Vinay**: Come in.

(The door opened.

Rudhika entered first.

This time…

Adhrika followed with an easy smile.

The dark circles beneath her eyes had softened.

Her hair was neatly tied.

She still carried memories.

But they no longer seemed to carry her.)

Vinay looked at them both.

His eyes smiled before his lips did.

**Professor Vinay**: Good morning.

**Rudhika**: Good morning, Professor.

**Adhrika**: Good morning.

(They sat down.)

For a few moments…

they simply talked.

About college.

Books.

The weather.

Nothing extraordinary.

Sometimes…

ordinary conversations are the greatest sign that life has begun flowing again.

Finally…

Rudhika spoke.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

I wanted to tell you something.

**Professor Vinay**: I'm listening.

(Rudhika smiled at her sister.)

**Rudhika**: She's different now.

Not because she's happy every single day…

but because she's living again.

She laughs.

She reads.

She cooks.

Yesterday she even scolded me for leaving my books on the bed.

(Adhrika laughed softly.)

**Adhrika**: Someone has to.

(Rudhika continued.)

**Rudhika**: She still has difficult days.

Sometimes she misses him.

Sometimes she cries.

But…

she doesn't stay trapped there anymore.

She comes back.

(She looked at Professor Vinay.)

**Rudhika**: I just wanted you to know…

she's doing much better.

(Vinay nodded gently.)

**Professor Vinay**: I'm glad.

Not because the pain disappeared.

But because she learned that pain doesn't have to become her entire identity.

(Adhrika looked thoughtful.)

**Adhrika**: I still ask myself your question.

"Is this a fact…

or a story my hurting mind is telling?"

It surprises me how often…

it's just a story.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Our minds tell many stories.

Some are beautiful.

Some are frightening.

Wisdom is learning not to believe every narrator who lives inside us.

(A comfortable silence settled.)

After a while…

Rudhika leaned forward.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

can I ask one last question?

**Professor Vinay**: Of course.

**Rudhika**: If someone wants to stay happy…

what should they remember?

(Vinay looked out of the window for a moment.)

Then he answered slowly.

**Professor Vinay**: I don't know if happiness is something we can permanently keep.

Like the weather…

it changes.

Some mornings are sunny.

Some are cloudy.

Some bring storms.

If we demand only sunshine…

we'll spend much of life disappointed.

But…

peace…

that is different.

Peace grows when we stop arguing with reality.

When we care deeply…

without trying to control everything.

When we keep learning.

When we remain grateful for what is present…

instead of living only in what is absent.

And perhaps most importantly…

when we remember that our worth does not rise with praise…

or fall with rejection.

(His voice remained calm.)

**Professor Vinay**: Don't chase happiness every day.

Instead…

live in a way that gives happiness many reasons to visit.

(The sisters exchanged a glance.)

(Rudhika smiled.)

**Rudhika**: I like that.

(After another quiet pause…

Adhrika asked her own question.)

**Adhrika**: Professor…

one day…

if someone comes to me…

broken…

crying…

the way I came to you…

how do I help them?

(Vinay smiled warmly.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's a beautiful question.

(He rested his hands on the table.)

**Professor Vinay**: First…

don't hurry to remove their pain.

People often think helping means immediately giving advice.

Sometimes…

advice is simply our discomfort speaking.

Second…

listen more than you speak.

Many hearts begin healing the moment they realize they don't have to defend their feelings.

Third…

be curious.

Ask gentle questions.

Not to satisfy your curiosity…

but to help them discover their own answers.

Fourth…

remember your limits.

You can walk beside someone.

You cannot walk for them.

And finally…

never forget that kindness and wisdom are different.

Kindness without wisdom may encourage dependence.

Wisdom without kindness may feel cold.

Real compassion needs both.

(Adhrika listened carefully.

Not as someone collecting techniques…

but as someone receiving a way of living.)

She nodded slowly.

**Adhrika**: I think…

I understand.

Maybe not completely.

But enough to begin.

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: That's all any of us can do.

Begin.

(The room grew quiet once more.)

Rudhika looked around the office.

The books.

The chessboard.

The little plant by the window.

She remembered the frightened girl who had first entered this room months ago.

The girl who carried anger.

Questions.

Loneliness.

Fear.

She looked at Professor Vinay.

Her eyes filled with tears.

Not tears of grief.

But of gratitude.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

when I first came here…

I thought you were going to teach me psychology.

(She laughed softly.)

**Rudhika**: You did.

But somehow…

you also taught me how to ask better questions…

how to listen…

how to forgive more slowly but more honestly…

and how to be a little kinder to myself.

(She paused.)

**Rudhika**: You never told us what to think.

You taught us how to think.

You never asked us to become copies of you.

You encouraged us to become better versions of ourselves.

For that…

thank you.

(Adhrika looked at him quietly.)

**Adhrika**: I came here believing I had been permanently broken.

You never once called me broken.

You treated me as someone who was hurting…

not someone beyond hope.

I don't know what the future holds.

I'll still have difficult days.

I'll still make mistakes.

But now…

I know those things don't define me.

Thank you…

for sitting with me until I could stand again.

(Vinay was silent for a few moments.)

He looked at the two sisters with quiet affection.

Then he spoke.

**Professor Vinay**: If you're grateful…

don't repay me.

Pass it on.

One day…

someone you meet will feel invisible.

Listen to them.

Someone will believe they are beyond hope.

Remind them they are more than their worst day.

Someone will lose their way.

Walk beside them for a while.

Not because the world needs more heroes.

But because it always needs more human beings who refuse to let compassion become ordinary.

(The sisters nodded.)

They stood.

Rudhika folded her hands respectfully.

Adhrika did the same.

Vinay returned the gesture.

No grand farewell.

No dramatic ending.

Just quiet respect.

(They walked toward the door.)

Before leaving…

Rudhika turned around one last time.

**Rudhika**: Professor…

will we meet again?

(Vinay smiled.)

**Professor Vinay**: Life has a habit of bringing sincere students and sincere questions together.

So…

I wouldn't be surprised.

(Rudhika grinned.)

The sisters stepped into the corridor.

Sunlight streamed through the windows.

Students walked past them.

Some carrying books.

Some carrying dreams.

Some carrying burdens no one else could see.

Rudhika and Adhrika walked down the corridor together.

Not because they had reached the end of their journey…

but because they finally believed they could continue it.

(Professor Vinay watched them leave.

He closed the office door gently.

Placed another book back onto the shelf.

Watered the little plant by the window.

And prepared for the next student who might one day walk through that door…

carrying questions of their own.)

For every generation has its struggles.

And every generation needs someone…

who listens before speaking.

**End of Book One**